

PC GAMER®

ANNUAL

2025

PC GAMER

T100P

THE BEST GAMES
YOU SHOULD
PLAY TODAY



HISTORY OF GTA

STORY OF THE GAME-
CHANGING SERIES



FAR CRY

HOW IT CHANGED PC
GAMING FOREVER



ASSASSIN'S CREED

CHRONICLING THE
SAGA ON PC



DOOM AT 30

GAMING'S MOST
ICONIC FPS



EXTRA LIFE

GRIM FANDANGO

FALLOUT

LETHAL COMPANY

SKYRIM

& MORE!

Digital
Edition



VOLUME
EIGHT

“CELEBRATE 30 YEARS OF THE MOST ICONIC FPS SERIES OF ALL TIME”



ROBERT JONES

Twitter

@rnicholasj

This year

Revisited insane Aramis Stilton's massive manor in A Crack in the Slab – *Dishonored 2*'s finest level.

Welcome to the latest edition of the PC Gamer Annual. In this special compilation, we've brought together the best games, features and Extra Life goodness from the magazine's last 12 months. We celebrate the diversity of PC gaming as a platform and showcase the games you should be playing right now in the latest version of our annual Top 100 list. On page 40, we chart the rise, rise

and rise of the *Grand Theft Auto* series. On page 60, we celebrate 30 years of *Doom*, the most iconic FPS series of all time. And on page 102, Rick Lane chats with *Far Cry* creator and director, Cevat Yerli, about the game's explosive history. And that's just for starters. So, what are you waiting for?

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

TALK TO PC GAMER

Have your say!
Email us at letters@pcgamer.com

The PC Gamer team



RICK LANE

Twitter

@Rick_Lane

This year

Took a trip down memory lane and through the mean streets of Vice City, Liberty City and San Andreas.



MATT KILLEEN

Instagram

@by_matt_killeen

This year

Tried to give peace a chance while playing through the best non-traditional (and nonviolent) war games on PC.



KYLE HOEKSTRA

Twitter

@kylehoekstra

This year

Traversed the history of the *Assassin's Creed* series, taking in Renaissance Italy, North America in revolt and more.



EMMA WITHINGTON

Twitter

@EWithingtons

This year

Found she needs more than books to live out her dream of being *Baldur's Gate III*'s foremost librarian.



MATT ELLIOTT

Twitter

@MGElliott

This year

Worked his way up to the top as the only historical hobbyist wrestler in the world's strangest sports entertainment game.



MOLLIE TAYLOR

Twitter

@mollietayy

This year

Fell asleep watching a longplay while writing a piece on how much she loves falling asleep to longplays.



Contents

ANNUAL
2025



Features

- 06 The PC Gamer Top 100
- 40 The history of GTA
- 50 Dishonored 2
- 60 30 years of Doom
- 70 The best non-traditional war games to play on PC
- 80 Assassin's Creed
- 88 Baldur's Gate III
- 96 The Elder Scrolls Online
- 102 Far Cry history

Extra Life

DIARY

- 112 Wrestling Empire: Part 1
- 116 Wrestling Empire: Part 2
- 120 Wrestling Empire: Part 3

MOD SPOTLIGHT

- 124 Star Wars mods
- 126 Lethal Company
- 128 Fallout show mods
- 130 Shame of Skyrim

REINSTALL

- 132 Grim Fandango
- 136 Syndicate

WHY I LOVE

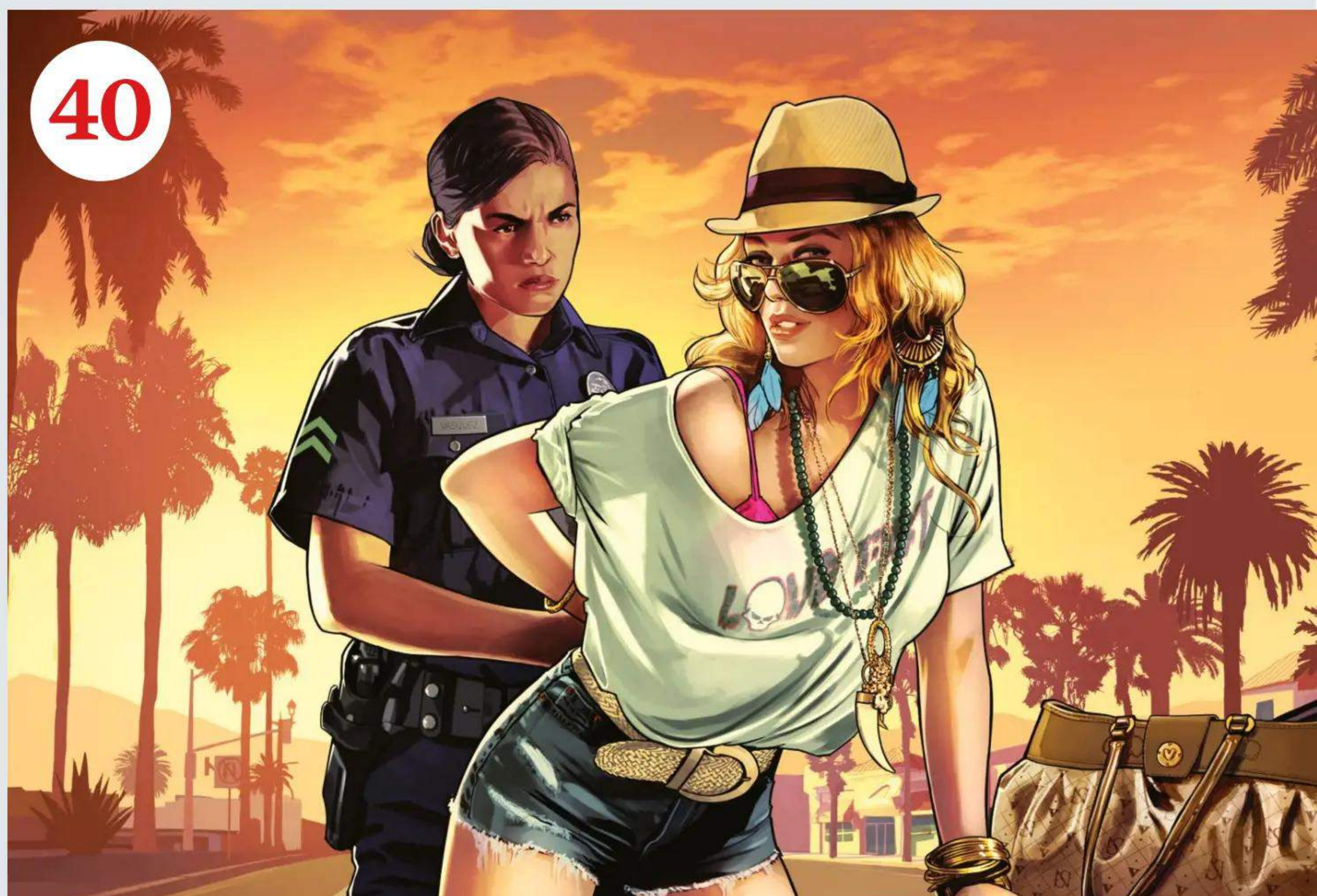
- 140 Project Wingman's 11th mission
- 142 Longplays
- 144 Tranquility Lane



06

PC GAMER
T100P
2024

40



06 THE PC GAMER TOP 100

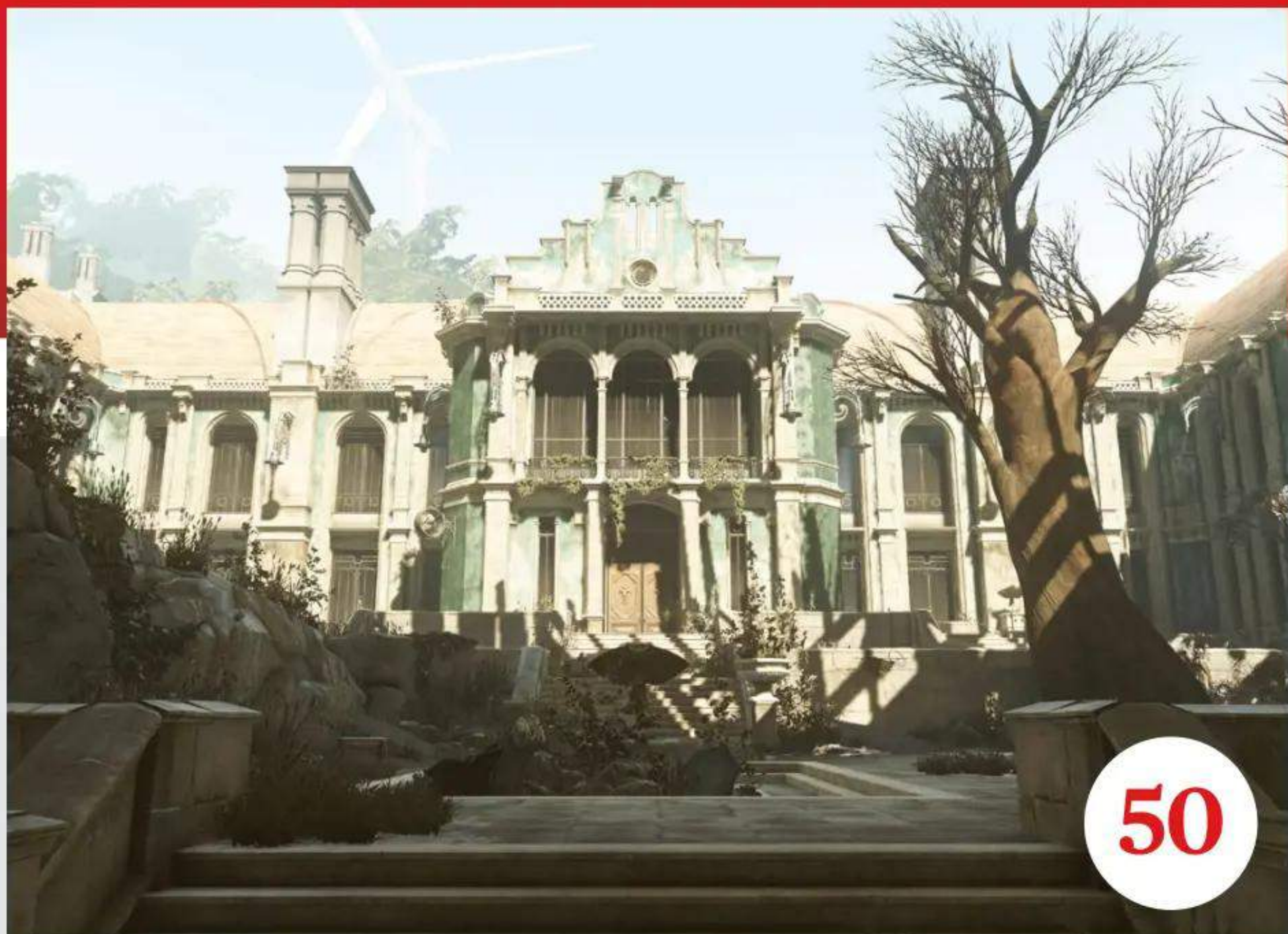
Discover the definitive 100 greatest PC games to play in 2024 in our annual list.

40 THE HISTORY OF GTA ON PC

Rick Lane digs deep into the bloody and bombastic history of the game-changing series.

50 A CRACK IN THE SLAB

Editor Rob revisits *Dishonored 2*'s finest level, speaking directly to its designer, Thomas Boucher.



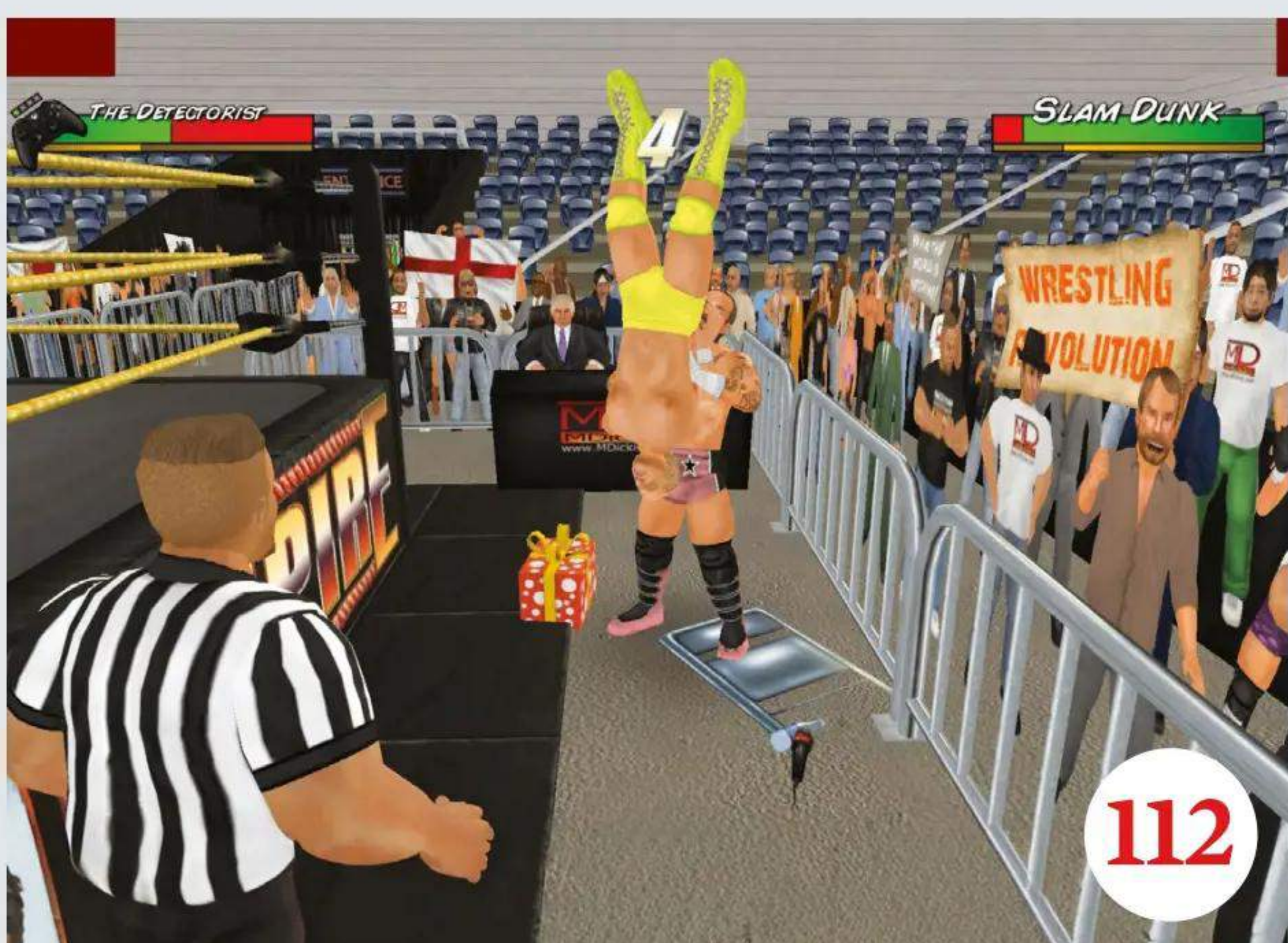
50



60



70



112



132

60

DOOM AT 30

On *Doom*'s 30th anniversary, Rick Lane looks back at the most iconic FPS series of all time, charting its huge impact on PC gaming and game development.

80

ASSASSIN'S CREED

Kyle Hoekstra provides a fascinating deep dive into the series' bloody history.

102

FAR CRY WITH CEVAT YERLI

Rick Lane chats with *Far Cry* creator and director, Cevat Yerli, about the game's explosive history.

132

GRIM FANDANGO

Ian Evenden reinstalls the legendary LucasArts point-and-click detective noir adventure.

PC GAMER
T100P
2024



Welcome

There are 103,744 games on Steam. Of those, 14,499 were released in 2023 alone. And that's to say nothing of the many, many PC games that haven't made it to Valve's digital storefront.

All of which is to say: it never gets any easier. More games arrive every year, but now, as when we started our annual list of the best PC games, we only have 100 spaces available for them.

Does that make the Top 100 pure folly? Maybe. But it's our folly, one that we use to celebrate the vibrancy and creativity of the medium. And hey, at least the list was easier to make this year than it will be in 2025.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE
UK EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
phil.savage@futurenet.com

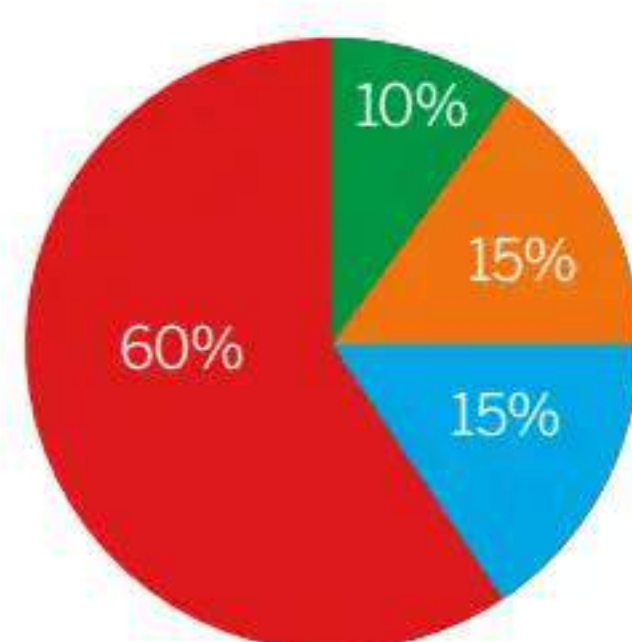
OUR VOTING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

Around 30 of PC Gamer's editors, writers and other staff were invited to rate games based on four categories we deem most important to earn a place in the Top 100. We want to recognise historical importance, how well it plays today, and also to give space for the newer games we can't put down. Most importantly, though, we need to really love each game we pick.

1 PC Gamer's writers vote for their favourite games across four categories.

2 The total score for each category is divided by the number of people who voted, to create an average score.

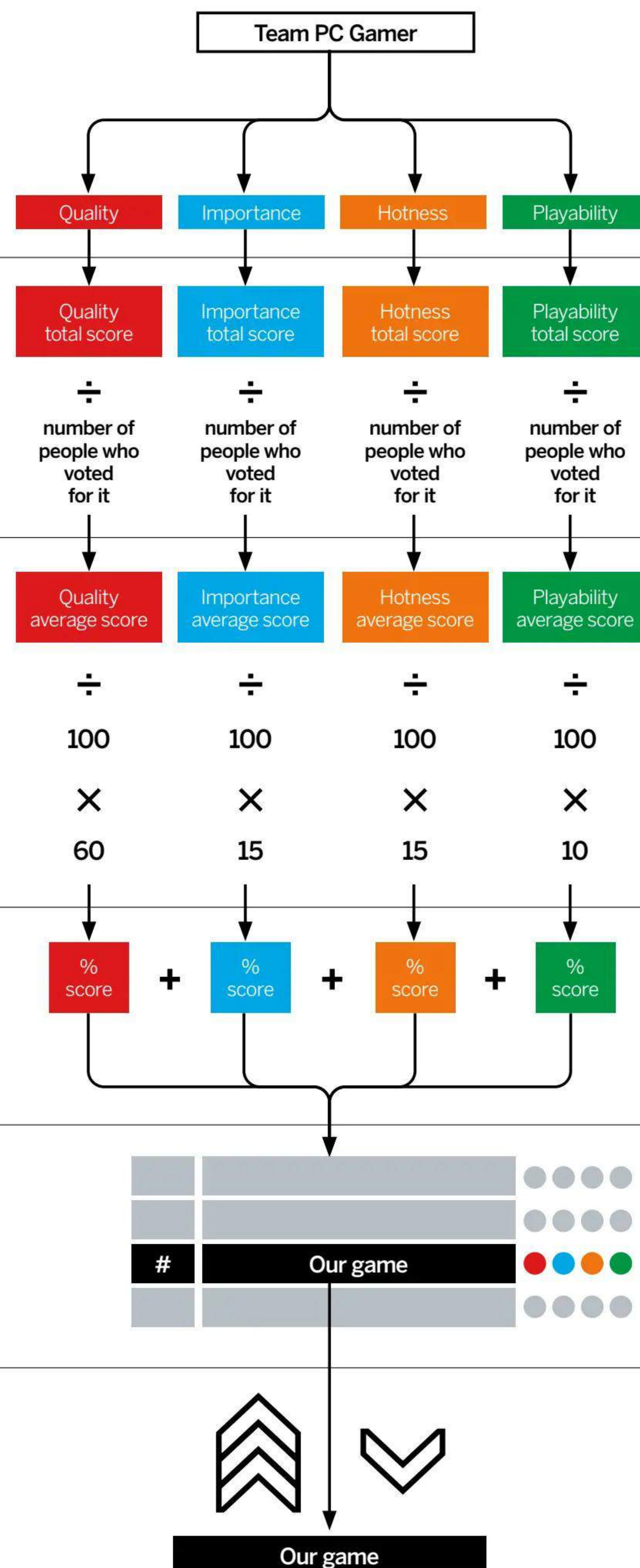
3 The four averages are split according to our special weighting.



4 The scores are then combined into an official Top 100 score, using maths and secrets.

5 The final scores are put in order to give us our provisional top 100 games list.

6 Writers can then demote or promote one game each, using arguments and democracy.



PERSONAL PICK

Jacob
Ridley



SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

I've noticed a distinct lack of rhythm games in this year's Top 100, and yet it's been a year when a truly fantastic rhythm game has left a lasting impression on me. Few games meld music, art style and good vibes as well as *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. I play it almost religiously every time I take a long-haul flight somewhere, and it never fails to bring a smile to my face.

PERSONAL PICK

Harvey
Randall



HADES 2

Is this cheating? Yes, but I put a very tasteful PowerPoint presentation together to get votes for this thing and I'll be damned if I let that go to waste. *Hades 2* is already bigger than the first game, somehow, and its music is even better than the first, impossibly. I also adore Melinoë to death. She's the workaholic to Zag's slacker, and I'm super invested in seeing her let her hair down.

100

VALHEIM

RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 213.85 | PROMOTED BY Jacob Ridley

Quality 7.44

Importance 7.00

Hotness 5.75

Playability 7.53

Sarah James: *Valheim* is still brilliant. It's survival without the endless stress of managing resources. It can be as relaxing or as difficult as you want it to be, and is a game I regularly return to if I want to unwind.

Jacob Ridley: There have been a good few additions to the game since 2021, including the Mistlands, where I've died a lot. Most of all I'm enjoying visiting towns I built with friends years ago – returning to make it all so much better.



99

GUILD WARS 2

RELEASED 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 214.10

Phil Savage: It's been 12 years, and *Guild Wars 2* is still a quietly revolutionary vision of what an MMO can be. There's no subscription, no FOMO-inducing scarcity, no penalty for taking an extended break. Everything it adds remains relevant, every new expansion simply adds more, and now ArenaNet is making a new one every year.

98

CITY OF HEROES: HOMECOMING

RELEASED 204 | TOP 100 SCORE 216.15

Harvey Randall: After the saga *City of Heroes* has been through, ending in a legitimate private server with an official thumbs-up from NCSoft, this is a very special MMO. I'm still best mates with a lot of the people I met there, and *Homecoming* has received enough updates that I wholeheartedly recommend revisiting it for more than nostalgia's sake.





97

DAVE THE DIVER

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 217.19 | PROMOTED BY Chris Livingston

Quality 7.36 Importance 6.64 Hotness 6.69 Playability 8.25

Robin Valentine: There's a real joy of discovery in *Dave the Diver*. Every step you take, some new system opens up to you – what makes the game special is that it's always revealing itself to be bigger than you thought it was.

The game's other great stroke of genius is centring that experience on Dave, an immediately lovable character and a guy who feels like he's just as vaguely bemused by all this weirdness as you are.



96 VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 219.68

Jody Macgregor: *Bloodlines* launched in such a state some people who played it then still have trauma. I took years to get around to it, after the unofficial patch, and it immediately went on my all-time list. Each vampiric bloodline feels completely different, whether you're a smooth-talking debauchee, goth wizard, or crazed visionary.

Joshua Wolens: It's got to be fate that *Bloodlines* and *KotOR 2* ended up next to each other. Proof that it doesn't matter if your game is practically falling apart: you can't hide greatness.

Andy Chalk: I've been through *Bloodlines* twice, and in many ways the second time was better than the first.



95 STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC 2

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.13

Wes Fenlon: Dril was talking about *KotOR 2* when he tweeted "the wise man bowed his head solemnly and spoke: 'theres actually zero difference between good & bad things. you imbecile. You fucking moron'" (I still love it, though).

Joshua Wolens: People poke fun at its sermonising, but it's still the smartest Star Wars game out there.

94

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

RELEASED 2009 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.30

Quality 7.87

Importance 7.80

Hotness 5.73

Playability 5.93

Harvey Randall: Every single companion character in *Dragon Age: Origins* is a complete home run – a feat that BioWare hasn't quite pulled off since. Also you get a dog that can tank for you. What's not to love?

Robin Valentine: *Origins* was such a watershed moment for the genre, combining the glossy, cinematic feel of big-budget action games with an unapologetically deep and expansive RPG experience. You don't get to *Baldur's Gate 3* without this game laying the groundwork.

And I genuinely think it's still the best one in the series to go back to – a rich and mature adventure, confident in its world-building and its old-school mechanics.



93

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

RELEASED 2009 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.63

Harvey Randall: You know a game's good when it basically invents a whole genre. *L4D2* is the cell culture stuff that other bangers like *Vermintide 2* and *Darktide 2* grew out of.

Phil Savage: This got the highest Importance score of any game in the bottom 30 of the list. I'm unlikely to play it today over something like *Vermintide 2*, but it's one of the best four-player co-op shooters around.

Rich Stanton: I don't think gaming has ever improved upon smacking a zombie in the face with a giant skillet. For all its subsequent imitators, I don't think any has quite recaptured that mix of panic, hilarity, balls-to-the-wall holdouts, and the satisfaction of making it through as a team.



92

GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.76

Nick Evanson: A perfect example of something that doesn't really bring anything new to the table, but what it does offer is a moving story, told through finely crafted gameplay, and replete with sumptuous scenery and vistas. The fact it runs so smoothly on all kinds of gaming PCs is no trivial matter either, especially after so many other disappointing PC ports.



91 DEAD CELLS

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.85

Rich Stanton: A great roguelike at launch, but the way it was built upon has made it an all-timer. Best of all was how the game subtly changed over time, increasingly focusing on the bizarre and wonderful combinations of weapons and perks you could obtain on each run and, no matter how OP you manage to get, almost always killing you anyway.

90 OUTER WILDS

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.02

Robin Valentine: I'm not sure any game has nailed exploration to the degree that *Outer Wilds* has. Its solar system is a little clockwork diorama, stuck in a 22-minute time loop – and yet within that tiny sandbox the feeling of discovery is so big and so rich. Every expedition you're learning and piecing together how things work, or you're dying in ridiculous ways.



88 PENTIMENT

TOP 100 SCORE 222.30

Andy Chalk: *Pentiment* starts at a slow burn, but that's what sets the hook: out of nowhere, I was suddenly immersed in a world filled with living, breathing people whose names I knew and lives I cared about. I tried so hard to do the right thing. And in the end, that's all I can say – I tried.

87 THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

TOP 100 SCORE 222.36

Robin Valentine: The only things more fascinating than *Golden Idol*'s intricate mysteries are the grotesque, gurning faces of its cast. A twisting, complex, and fascinating story of murder, magic, and authoritarianism, told in a truly unique way that compels you to pore over its details.

86 ULTRAKILL

TOP 100 SCORE 222.90

Ted Litchfield: We're still waiting for the third and final episode, but *Ultrakill* is already an absolute heater in Early Access: An absurdist retelling of Dante's *Inferno* in which you play a blood-powered omniscient robot invading hell in search for fuel. It plays like *Doom Eternal* running at 1.5x speed.



89 DEATH STRANDING

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.09

Quality 7.92 Importance 6.79 Hotness 5.50 Playability 8.10

Rich Stanton: *Death Stranding* is 100% a vibes game. Though I watched the cutscenes my first time through, and am always interested in teasing out Kojima's themes, this is an experience that (like hill-walking itself) needs a certain mindset. It's a game I've been through twice and is now one I return to just to be in that zone again for a couple of hours, totally relaxed as I plan out my route, long past the stage of caring about timings or grades or even BTs. The days of being a hero delivery

man are over: now I'm just Sam, out for a walk with BB and the camera, luxuriating in a virtual world that feels made for contemplation. The great poet William Wordsworth once said he composed while walking, that steady pace its own rhythm for the mind, and in *Death Stranding* at its best you know how he felt. I'm not sure whether Kojima Productions set out to make a zen simulator but, after living with this game for years, that's somehow where I've ended up with it.

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2024

85

DESTINY 2

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.91

Quality 7.24

Importance 7.67

Hotness 7.79

Playability 7.71

Jacob Ridley: I mean we're all still playing it, right?

Tim Clark: Yes Jacob, yes we are. If you'd asked me this time last year whether Bungie had any realistic prospect of sticking the landing with *The Final Shape*, I wouldn't have been taken any bets. But the landing was very much stuck. The new subclass is an all you can eat buffet, the story actually got tied off satisfactorily, and there were some genuine emotional beats landed. Briefly, the community was even... happy.

Phil Savage: *Destiny 2* has had plenty of ups and downs, but right now, thanks to *The Final Shape*, it's absolutely worth playing.



84 INSIDE

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.98

Robin Valentine: Maybe still the best ending in videogames, right?

Rich Stanton: A flawless gem. *Inside* is supremely clever, but what sticks with you is how the facility slowly unfolds itself, the looming horror on all sides, and the awful question of just who you are: and what you're doing here.

Sean Martin: I just wish there was more news on Playdead's next game.



83 SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V

RELEASED 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.06

Nick Evanson: Sure, *Civ VI* is OK and *Civ IV* is very good, but number five is perfection and probably the only 'real' *Civilization* game that matters. It almost certainly defines the phrase 'just one more turn'. Even the DLCs are great, especially *Brave New World*, and how many games can say that? If I was going to be stuck on a desert island for the rest of my life and could only take one game with me, it'd be *Civ V*.

Phil Savage: If you're new to the series, *Civ VI* is probably the one to play – especially following its many updates and DLCs. But I have more personal affection for *Civ V*, and many, many more nights lost to its compelling 4X loop.



PERSONAL PICK

Jake Tucker



ARMA 3

Arma 3 is an all-timer if you're willing to weigh your PC down with a terabyte of mods and embrace the soldier fantasy. A clunky military sandbox that is kept alive by hundreds of modders making content, *Arma 3* works best when you grab your Teamspeak brothers-in-arms and go on a little hike with guns, calling in your friends with the attack chopper when things get rough.

PERSONAL PICK

Wes Fenlon



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

I threw the Top 100 into chaos by nominating this innovative Nintendo classic, which highlights the intricate schedules of a townful of NPCs living a three-day time loop. *Majora's* great, but more importantly, it's now playable at 4K, 60fps on PC thanks to a (legal!) port that dynamically recompiles the N64 code. The harbinger of more amazing fan-made ports to come!

82

HOTLINE MIAMI

RELEASED 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.29

Quality 8.07

Importance 8.00

Hotness 4.00

Playability 8.00

Jake Tucker: Ostensibly a combat title, *Hotline Miami* is really a puzzle game about how you can better murder an army of criminals in tightly designed levels. The throbbing soundtrack, endless parade of white-suited

mobsters and vicious ultraviolence combine to create a flow-state fever dream. Stacks of indie games have tried to emulate the split-second brutality of *Hotline Miami*, but nobody does it better than Dennaton Games.



80

CAVES OF QUD

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.80

Lincoln Carpenter: A traditional, tile-based roguelike that has a fascination with chrome spindles, transdimensional excretions, and books full of procedural gibberish. It's a game where every run has its own layered, surreal history to uncover and every cave could contain a cybernetic implant that lets you conjure unlimited force knives.



81

KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.50

Andy Chalk: Just an incredible vibe. A man, a dog, a truck, a delivery to make. A slow drift along a mystical highway cutting through the heartland of America. Pretentious post-modernism for ennui junkies? I don't think so. *Kentucky Route Zero* is a beautiful, moving journey through a world that threatens to become uncomfortably familiar to us all.



The Top 100

79 BALDUR'S GATE 2

TOP 100 SCORE 224.13

Joshua Wolens: Not many games can boast what *Baldur's Gate* can: every entry in the series is unalloyed gold, and this 24-year-old game can still hold its own against its feted successor from last year. Clever, epic, and with a power curve nothing has matched before or since, this is still a must-play.

78 ARMORED CORE 6

TOP 100 SCORE 224.32

Wes Fenlon: Blends mecha cool, sci-fi dystopia and vast build variety into From's most straightforward action game.
Harvey Randall: A game brave enough to ask: what if FromSoftware didn't make you pay to upgrade weapons or respect? Turns out: a ton of great stuff.

77 DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

TOP 100 SCORE 224.73

Robin Valentine: There are a lot of co-op games these days, but few force you to truly cooperate like *Deep Rock Galactic* does. Each player is armed with their own distinctive set of tools – only by combining them in creative ways do you have a chance of making your way through the caverns.



76 DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.25

Fraser Brown: Ignore the number – *Dishonored 2* will always be a top 10 game. Arkane's gift to humanity is the pinnacle of stealthy sandboxes: freakishly flexible, devilishly smart, and god damn is it a looker, with a bold art direction that's refusing to age. I broke my rule about not responding to emails on holiday to make sure this bad boy stayed on the list.

75 CHIVALRY 2

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.00

Tyler Wilde: This multiplayer medieval warfare game is both extremely unserious – there's a key dedicated to shouting and you can beat enemies to death with flaming chickens – and 100% serious, with well-designed melee combat that gives outnumbered sword fighters a chance if they're skilled enough (and some are). It's the perfect combo of sweaty and silly.



74 MAX PAYNE

RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.00

Quality 8.55 Importance 7.83 Hotness 4.17 Playability 5.73

Jake Tucker: *Max Payne* lit a fire inside me like a bottle of hot sauce poured down my throat, a time when I talked like a half-baked noir character and wondered if it would be faster to get everywhere by shootdodging instead of the walking I'd done up until that point. Payne, emblazoned with the ever-grimacing mug of Remedy creative director Sam Lake, is a trauma-ridden cop having the worst night of his life, and by the time it's done you'll have killed every mook in New York in a series of

brutal and frenetic firefights. It's a dumb '90s action movie in videogame form, but you'll smile through every second.
Andy Chalk: I don't think *Max Payne* has held up very well over the years – James McCaffrey's voice acting seems particularly flat compared to his later work – but the game that gave us bullet time, Dick Justice, and some of the best faux-noir quotes in videogame history will always be a favourite in my book. "He was trying to buy more sand for his hourglass. I wasn't selling any."



requested.



73

PAPERS, PLEASE

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.19

Quality 8.21

Importance 7.78

Hotness .22

Playability 7.80

Harvey Randall: One of the few games I've played that actually makes choosing to suck at it a mechanic itself. *Papers, Please* plays with the space of failure in games – often a mere punishment – and asks you just how many hits you're willing to take to preserve goodness in a drab and heartless world.

Fraser Brown: Look, it's just fun to be really depressed and perform menial tasks under the yoke of an authoritarian regime. Hang on a minute... no it's not. Yet *Papers, Please* remains exceptional – one of those special indie games that forever changed the texture of videogames.



72

CYBERPUNK 2077

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.05

Wes Fenlon: After *Phantom Liberty*, *Cyberpunk 2.0* deserves even higher placement! I bounced off it completely at launch, but found myself fully immersed in Night City last year. The reworked RPG skill trees thread wonderfully into different combat styles. The way mocapped characters lean against walls or constantly move in cutscenes is so stunning I even accept having to hear the word 'choom' ad infinitum.

Joshua Wolens: Sticking Keanu Reeves' angry, angsty ghost in your head is the best idea CDPR ever had. Johnny Silverhand makes *Cyberpunk* for me, and your developing friendship with him takes it from 'great RPG' to 'personal all-timer'.



71

ALIEN ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.29

Rich Stanton: The only Alien game ever made where I am actually scared of the Alien, and a perfect corrective to Hollywood's mismanagement of the series. This was a labour of love for its developers, and that shines through in the bravery of building the whole thing around one Alien, and an environment that actually feels like a lived-in and functional space station.

PERSONAL PICK

Ted Litchfield



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

Neverwinter Nights is an endless RPG feast: the 7/10 base game from 2002 has nostalgia value for me, but that's just the beginning. In 2003 we got two expansions that formed a single fantastic fantasy campaign, while the real *NwN* is a staggering library of user-made campaigns and MMO servers that take advantage of one of the best RPG builders ever made.

PERSONAL PICK

Elie Gould



CULT OF THE LAMB

I actually petitioned for *Overwatch 2* to be in this list, but then Blizzard nerfed Ana for what felt like the eleventh time this year so I've switched gears to *Cult of the Lamb*. This roguelite crusade clicks with me for so many reasons, the art's cool, the fights are epic, and I'm a self-admitted people pleaser so the cult management aspect of the game is just *chef's kiss*.

70

STRANGE HORTICULTURE

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.30

Quality 9.00

Importance 5.75

Hotness 5.25

Playability 8.50

Jody Macgregor: There's a mystery subgenre about detectives with unrelated day jobs – a retired cop who runs a restaurant, a pair of gardeners, etc. *Strange Horticulture* is that, only you've inherited a plant shop where half

the mystery is what the unlabelled flowers are. While solving that you're roped into a mystery with poisonings and druid rituals that can conveniently be solved by someone who has become an expert in occult botany.



69

SIGNALIS

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.30

Tyler Colp: A grimy, psychological horror game that looks a lot like an old *Resident Evil*. Although it may feel small, its world is vast and surreal and an unforgettably haunting setting.

Jody Macgregor: When a horror series goes sci-fi it's usually not good. And yet, even though *Signalis* is essentially the *Silent Hill* equivalent of *Leprechaun 4: In Space*, it's a masterpiece.

68

TITANFALL 2

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.35

Jake Tucker: *Titanfall 2*'s campaign is a selection box of fantastic FPS ideas. Every level does something new with the theme or mechanics, sparking the sort of curiosity and joy usually reserved for Nintendo games. The timey wimey fun of *Effect and Cause* is popular enough to give the level its own Wikipedia entry, and the game is littered with shining ideas like this.



67

MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.66

Quality 7.92

Importance 7.73

Hotness 5.82

Playability 7.36

Wes Fenlon: *Monster Hunter Rise* is called the 'anime bullshit' *Monster Hunter*, and even with my extremely high anime BS tolerance I prefer the weightier *World*, which emphasises the natural ecosystem and doesn't demand I literally herd cats and dogs.

Robin Valentine: *Rise* definitely felt like a throwback, more suited to handheld – on PC, *World* is still the definitive *Monster Hunter* experience, an incredible modernisation of the series that makes its deep and nuanced systems more accessible than they've ever been before. There are few rushes in gaming as intense as bringing down a mighty beast together with your friends.



66

KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.77

Phil Savage: Here's a phenomenon I've noticed in Top 100 voting over the years: a disappointing sequel can also ruin the placement of its better, more beloved predecessor. It's almost as if the stink of the sequel's failure taints our perception of a game we once loved. See the lack of *Cities: Skylines* in this year's list as a prime example.

Not *Kerbal Space Program*, though. The early access sequel may be being beasted in the Steam reviews, but the original sandbox space sim is still holding its own. It's still a magnificent, almost perfectly formed playbox – an entertaining engine for physics-driven slapstick and an endlessly enjoyable sandbox for building rockets and trying to fix rocket-based disasters.



65

RUST

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.80

Andy Edser: *Rust* is humanity distilled to its purest components: creativity, paranoia, and brutality. There you'll be, merrily gathering resources for your ramshackle base, only to pause like a fearful gazelle. What was that? A shadow? Must be nothing. Seconds later, gunfire and a fade to black. Your corpse is looted. You have been *Rust*-ed.

64

DIABLO II

RELEASED 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.00

Quality 8.17

Importance 8.75

Hotness 4.75

Playability 6.08

Rich Stanton: I'm not going to say that dungeon-crawling loot 'em ups never got any better than *Diablo II*, but hear me out: maybe they didn't. *Diablo II* is perfectly happy just to let you build a little murder person, and run around with other little murder people spamming the bejesus out of attacks that turn monsters into bloody gibs. And then let you do it again.

Tyler Wilde: The supposedly "dark" *Diablo IV* looks like a video slot machine next to *Diablo II*, which was so literally dark you couldn't see to the edge of the screen. It felt lonely and dangerous.

63

RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.05

Elie Gould: After spending half of 2023 complaining about all the uninspired remakes we were getting, *Resident Evil 4 Remake* not only made me look like a fool but completely changed my mind about remakes. It managed to retain most of the original's personality while making sensible improvements – I'm still so happy they got rid of the weird Facetime calls where Saddler and Salazar would just call you an idiot.

Sean Martin: This remake plays exactly how I remember the original. It wasn't until later that I realised quite how much had been added, including new weapons, puzzles, and improved horror sequences, plus even a little shooting gallery where you can earn charms for your gun case.



62

NIER: AUTOMATA

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.29

Mollie Taylor: Hi, it's me, the person who gushes about this game every dang year. *Nier: Automata* has everything: A gripping story, immaculate post-apocalyptic vibes and a button that lets you explode the skirt off one of the main characters. There's rarely a dull moment, its story beats constantly surprising me or leaving me in suspense.



61 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED 2007 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.69

Elie Gould: I was a bit late to this party as it was released in 2007 when I was seven years old. But having *TF2* as the first real FPS my friends and I played together means it has a very special place in my heart. And now we're finally seeing some action taken against botting, it may even be playable enough for me to enjoy once more.

60 SYSTEM SHOCK REMAKE

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.88

Ted Litchfield: This is the best entry point into the entire *Shock* series in 2024. It may not have *System Shock 2*'s creepy biological horror or *BioShock*'s highfalutin' notions, but it's an incredible first-person shooter whose cyberpunk aesthetic feels fresh even with the genre's overexposure. It's also a masterclass in how to remake a game.



58 FORTNITE

TOP 100 SCORE 227.24

Nick Evanson: It's just a game for kids, right? One for parents to rage about and the media to knock up stories about how it's the doom of humanity. It's none of these things, just a perfectly balanced multiplayer game that's fun, easy to play, and has masses of free content to keep you occupied for hours.

57 THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

TOP 100 SCORE 227.37

Joshua Wolens: Before the Dragonborn, there was the Nerevarine, on a quest to assassinate a god because a drug addict asked them to. Sometimes broken, often unintuitive, always gloriously strange, *Morrowind* was Bethesda at its most mechanically and narratively ambitious.

56 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

TOP 100 SCORE 227.38

Tyler Wilde: It's buggier than the underside of a log, but Ubisoft's tactical team shooter remains one of my go-to games for casual competition. It leads to great moments when my crew's plans fail or succeed spectacularly, but I also favour *Siege* just for its genuinely low time-to-kill and lethal headshots.



59 UNAVOWED

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.10

Quality 9.00 Importance 6.67 Hotness 4.67 Playability 8.67

Robin Valentine: A masterful combination of a classic point-and-click adventure with BioWare-style companions and moral choices. It feels like an experiment in how a very old-fashioned genre can be made to feel fresh and relevant, and the result is something really striking that I wish had been more influential than it was.

Its urban fantasy world – where djinn and demons lurk just under the surface of mundane life – is so enthralling, and the perfect setting for a story that

effortlessly weaves between moments of lightness and humour, and truly dark and terrible crimes. That central narrative is bolstered by developer Wadjet Eye's extensive experience creating supernatural mysteries.

Fraser Brown: Play this, then play every Wadjet Eye adventure game, especially the *Blackwell* series. This one's more ambitious, but bickering crime-solvers Rosa and her dead pal Joey get stuck into some exceptional mysteries bolstered by best-in-class puzzles.



T100P

2024

55

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH

RELEASED 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.90

Quality 8.08

Importance 8.10

Hotness 5.10

Playability 7.67

Elie Gould: The Binding of Isaac is the kind of love/hate relationship that I look for in all my roguelikes. Its witty writing and gory art set the bar back in 2011, and over a decade later, I'm pressed to find a roguelike I enjoy more.

Robin Valentine: A lot of its humour has aged pretty badly, but its core roguelike mechanics, with their emphasis on discovering new wild and exciting builds every run, are still solid – and it's easy to see how influential they've been on the rest of the genre.

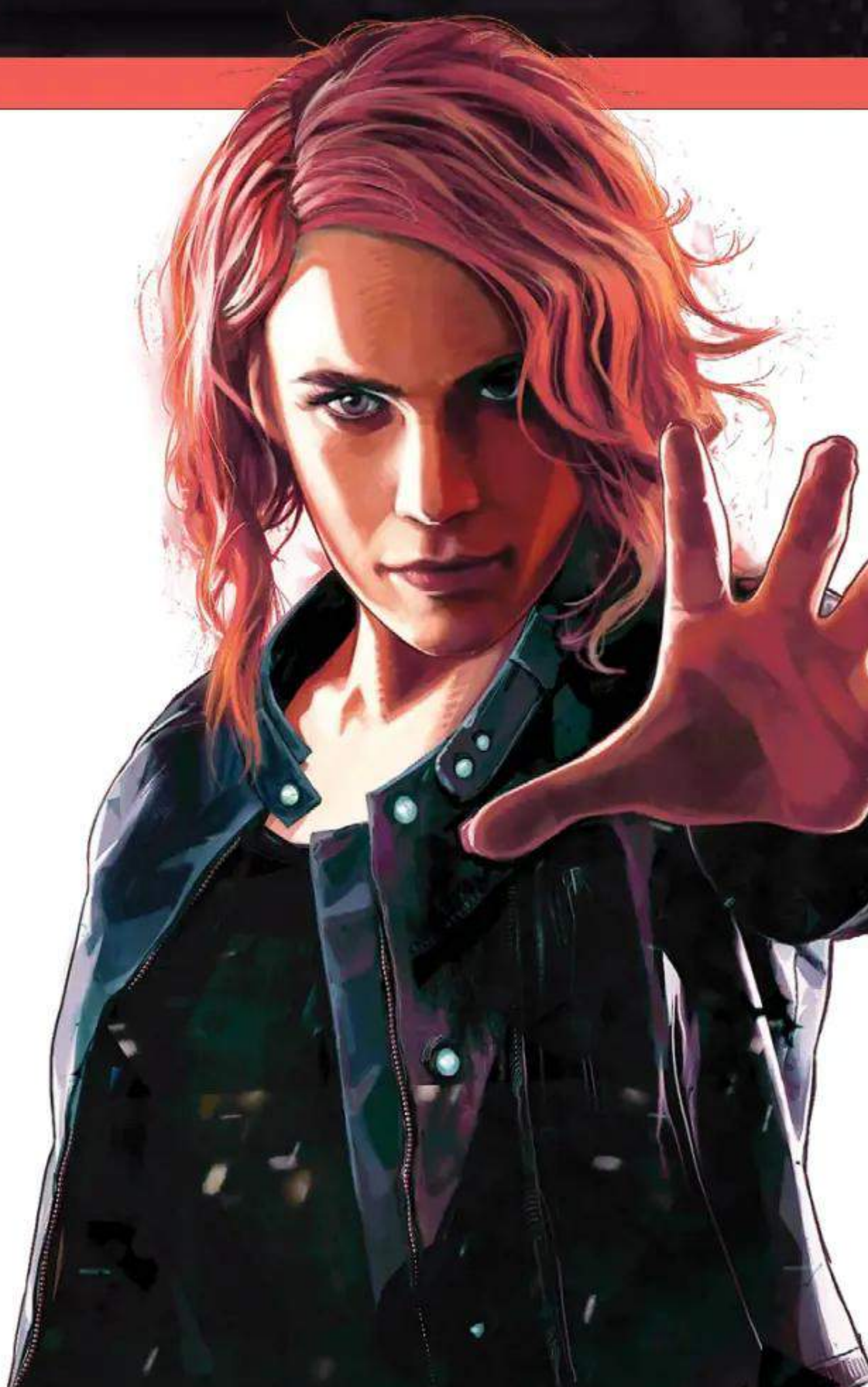


54 WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE 2

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.97

Harvey Randall: *Vermintide 2* took *Left 4 Dead 2*'s ball and ran with it past the finish line, out the stadium, to touch down on an entirely different court (I don't know sports). An exceptional addition to the core machine that made Valve's work sing.

Wes Fenlon: If you haven't lately, give *Darktide* a chance – it's the new hotness to *Vermintide 2*'s old reliable.



53 CONTROL

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.17

Robin Valentine: Equal parts SCP Foundation and David Lynch, *Control*'s strange and unsettling adventure feels like a real watershed moment for Remedy. One of gaming's most idiosyncratic studios was finally able to get as weird as it wanted on a grand scale, in the process kicking off its own connected universe (laying track for the even better *Alan Wake 2*). The world is definitely the biggest draw – the more you explore the Federal Bureau of Control, learning its secrets and witnessing its wonders and horrors, the more enthralled you become. But there's also plenty of fun to be had in its chaotic, scenery-destroying combat, especially once you earn enough psychic abilities.



52

WILDERMYTH

RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.43

Quality 8.57

Importance 6.43

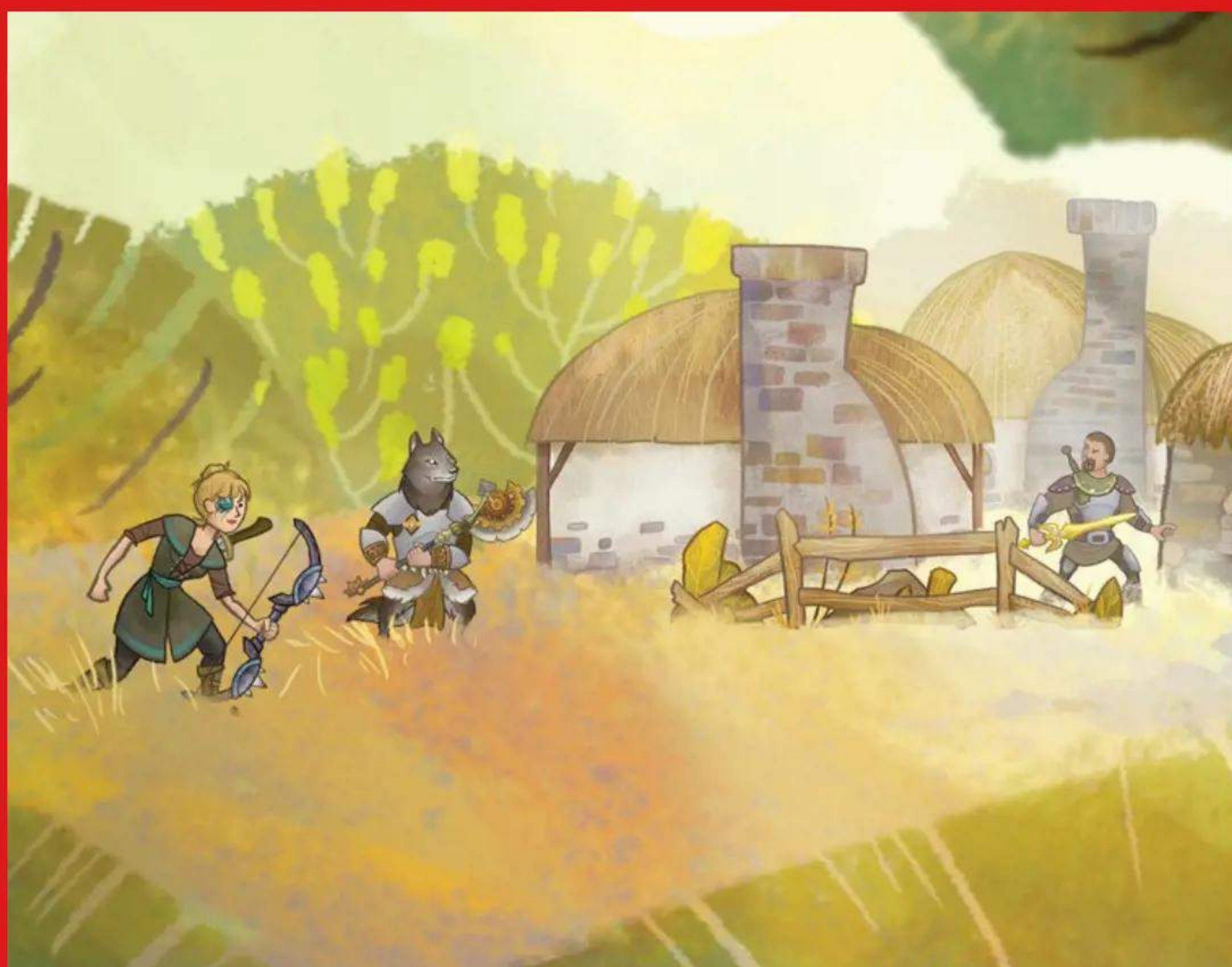
Hotness 4.33

Playability 8.57

Harvey Randall: I only have kind words for *Wilderness* – *XCOM* rendered as a storybook. Its charming vignettes add just enough flavour to your characters to project all sorts of stories onto them, often dramatically changing

them in the process. It helps that it's a solid tactical RPG, too.

Robin Valentine: I don't think any other game evokes the feel of a rambling tabletop RPG campaign as well as *Wilderness* does (sorry *BG3*).



51

SPELUNKY

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.71

Joshua Wolens: The most moreish roguelike ever. I spent much of 2013 one-more-running my way through several hundred hours of *Spelunky*, switching from sheer triumph to utter despair as the game's perfectly honed balance alternated between punishing and uplifting me. The sequel is great, but nothing has ever threaded that difficulty needle like the first game.

50

HITMAN: WORLD OF ASSASSINATION

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.76

Lauren Morton: There's a real joy in a well-built sandbox that *Hitman* evokes over and over with its intricate levels and deep stealth. The answer to "can I kill *this* target in *this* way?" is almost always "yes," but it's more fun finding out how to make it work. This is what keeps me up for hours, never growing bored even as I'm crouched on the second floor of Dartmoor's library.



PERSONAL PICK

Lauren Morton



THE SIMS 4

I campaigned to get *The Sims 3* on this list, which resulted in no *Sims* on this list, somehow. I will recant my betrayal. *The Sims 4* is a bug-ridden mess at times, but it's still one of my go-to casual creative outlets. Nothing is more relaxing than cluttering up a little kitchen at the weekend. There's a huge audience here starved for options, and until more games like *The Sims* finally launch, this is the best by default.

PERSONAL PICK

Robin Valentine



DEEP ROCK GALACTIC SURVIVOR

This 'auto-shooter', heavily inspired by *Vampire Survivors*, has been my new obsession this year. I've played a lot of games in this genre and I genuinely think it's the best of the lot, bringing in ideas from the original *Deep Rock Galactic* and adding new layers of strategy. While battling bugs you're also mastering your environment, digging your way to new paths and defensive positions.

The Top 100

49 CITIZEN SLEEPER

TOP 100 SCORE 228.79

Jody Macgregor: Half RPG, half visual novel, only instead of an anime hero I'm a synthetic who lives in a shipping container and eats noodles.
Harvey Randall: A beautifully written batch of heartache and nostalgia that's as much about finding a new home as it is letting go.

48 DOOM ETERNAL

TOP 100 SCORE 230.32

Morgan Park: *Doom Eternal* is a minor miracle – a vision of what the FPS would have become if people kept making *Doom* clones well into the 2010s. Id built *Eternal* on the success of the 2016 reboot, with weak spots, platforming and status effects until it landed on a glorious combat loop.

47 FROSTPUNK

TOP 100 SCORE 230.76

Sean Martin: One of the most atmospheric games I've ever played. Whenever I recall it, I can't help but transform into a grizzled Victorian recounting how he survived by eating shoe leather.
Fraser Brown: Easily the most fun I've had accidentally letting urchins freeze to death.



46 INTO THE BREACH

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.01

Wes Fenlon: Chess against monsters, only you choose whether your chess pieces have big guns, laser whips, or cleverer weapons.
Evan Lahti: The way it expresses difficulty is so special. There are genuine no-win scenarios. The possibility space is perfectly arranged on that 8x8 grid: you have an intuitive sense of what you can do.

45 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.19

Morgan Park: If *GTA VI* is as good as we hope it'll be, this might be one of *GTA V*'s final appearances here. But it's still an all-timer, with memorable missions, characters, and an open world that's just a joy to drive around.
Tyler Wilde: Despite Rockstar's reluctance to fully embrace the PC, it's where *GTA V* has really flourished, especially modded roleplaying servers.



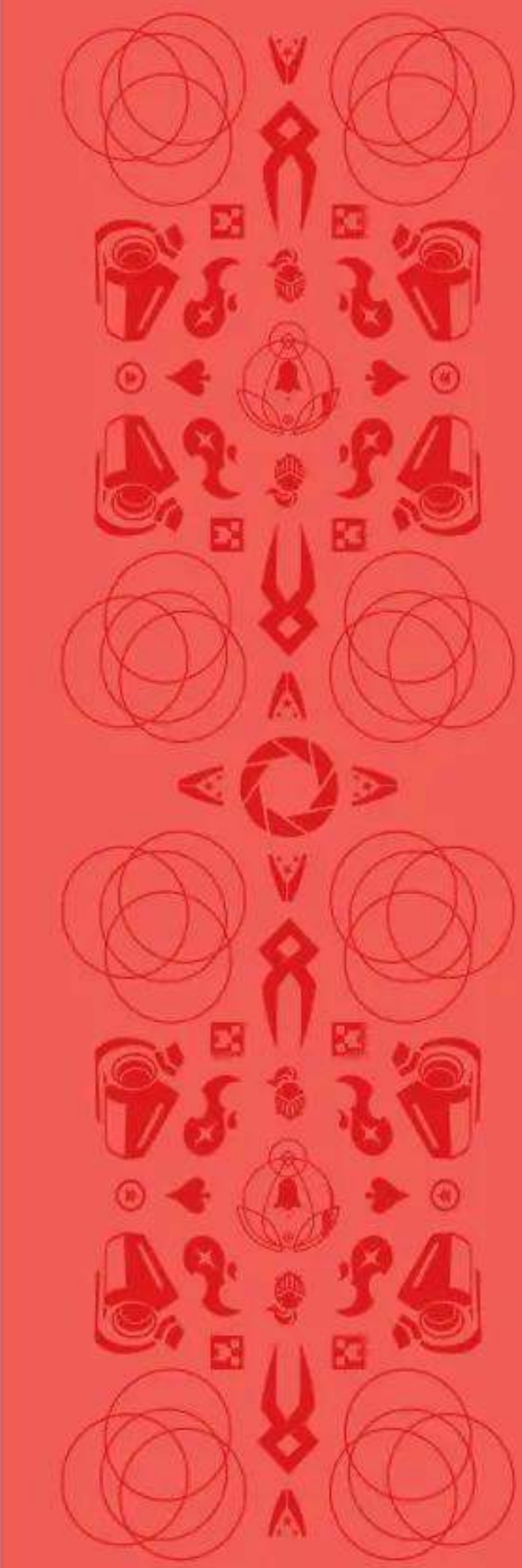
44 DEUS EX

RELEASED 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.22

Quality 8.36 Importance 9.31 Hotness 4.92 Playability 5.58

Ted Litchfield: One of the most beloved games of all time, and somehow still an underrated work of science fiction. Its more absurd or goofy elements belie a canner understanding of the world than its self-serious 2010s reboot, and I still think *Deus Ex* deserves a *Metal Gear Solid 2*-style reappraisal for what it had to say about surveillance, the internet, and the co-opting of public institutions by private wealth. I'm glad we all agree it has phenomenal gameplay and vibes, though.

Jake Tucker: I like it because it's a science fiction sandbox where you'll feel like a cinematic super-spy that can do everything. As long as that everything involves blowing up a load of robotic government agents with a GEP gun.
Andy Chalk: It looks kind of shitty, the voice acting is terrible, and the story is a barely-coherent mashup of '90s conspiracy nonsense that would make Chris Carter shake his head and leave the room. And it is so great! I do not understand it.



43

ANIMAL WELL

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.30

Quality 8.20 Importance 5.80

Hotness 7.20 Playability 8.40

Shaun Prescott: In this post-*Hollow Knight* world it's exceedingly tough to stand out among modern metroidvanias. *Animal Well* adopts the time-worn pleasures of filling out a vast, interconnected map, but replaces increasingly yawn-inducing Soulslike combat with puzzle-solving. That doesn't sound super inspiring as a concept, but the game's success is all in the loving details: the cryptic subterranean ambience, the insim flexibility of your tools, and – not insignificantly – the fact that the world's secrets go so much deeper than most players will ever realise. Once the credits roll the real *Animal Well* begins, though you're going to need the help of other players to see its end.



42 PREY

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.45

Andy Chalk: I will never not be angry that *Prey* didn't get a sequel. I will never not be angry that Arkane Austin is closed. With all due respect to Phil, I will never not be just a little bit irritated that we scored it a paltry 79% in our review. *Prey* is the real successor to the *System Shock* crown, a game that should have heralded a golden age for the immersive sim genre. Its Talos-1 space station was a joy to explore, tense, terrifying, and believable in equal measure, the deadly Typhon haunting its halls are marvellously alien, and it served up one of the most wonderfully awful 'oh no' endings I've ever been hit with. *Prey* is a great game, and *Prey* deserved better.



41 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.97

Wes Fenlon: It may feel a bit like the pencil sketch of a masterwork, but fantastic characters make it worth playing even after *Baldur's Gate 3*. Especially in co-op.

Lauren Morton: This is the game that proved Larian had the grit and vision to pull off *Baldur's Gate 3*. The sandbox combat, open-ended questing, and irreverent humour are all in here.

PERSONAL PICK

*Rich
Stanton*



BIOSHOCK

I almost feel this fell off the list by accident. The first half of *BioShock* is the most incredible singleplayer FPS experience I've had and, even if it can't quite maintain that stellar quality until the end, this stands proud as one of the most vividly brilliant environments in gaming, packed with over-reaching ideas, a stupendously fun toolkit, and the genius, macabre, haunting threat of the Big Daddies.

PERSONAL PICK

*Jody
Macgregor*



**WARHAMMER
40,000: DAWN
OF WAR**

I'm as disappointed as you that the RTS genre peaked 20 years ago, but it did. *Dawn of War* has just enough base-building to scratch the itch, but instead of having to harvest gas you progress by capturing points – actually playing the game. That leads to conflicts, which look amazing thanks to an embarrassment of sync-kill animations. It's the best.

40

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.69

Quality 8.00

Importance 7.89

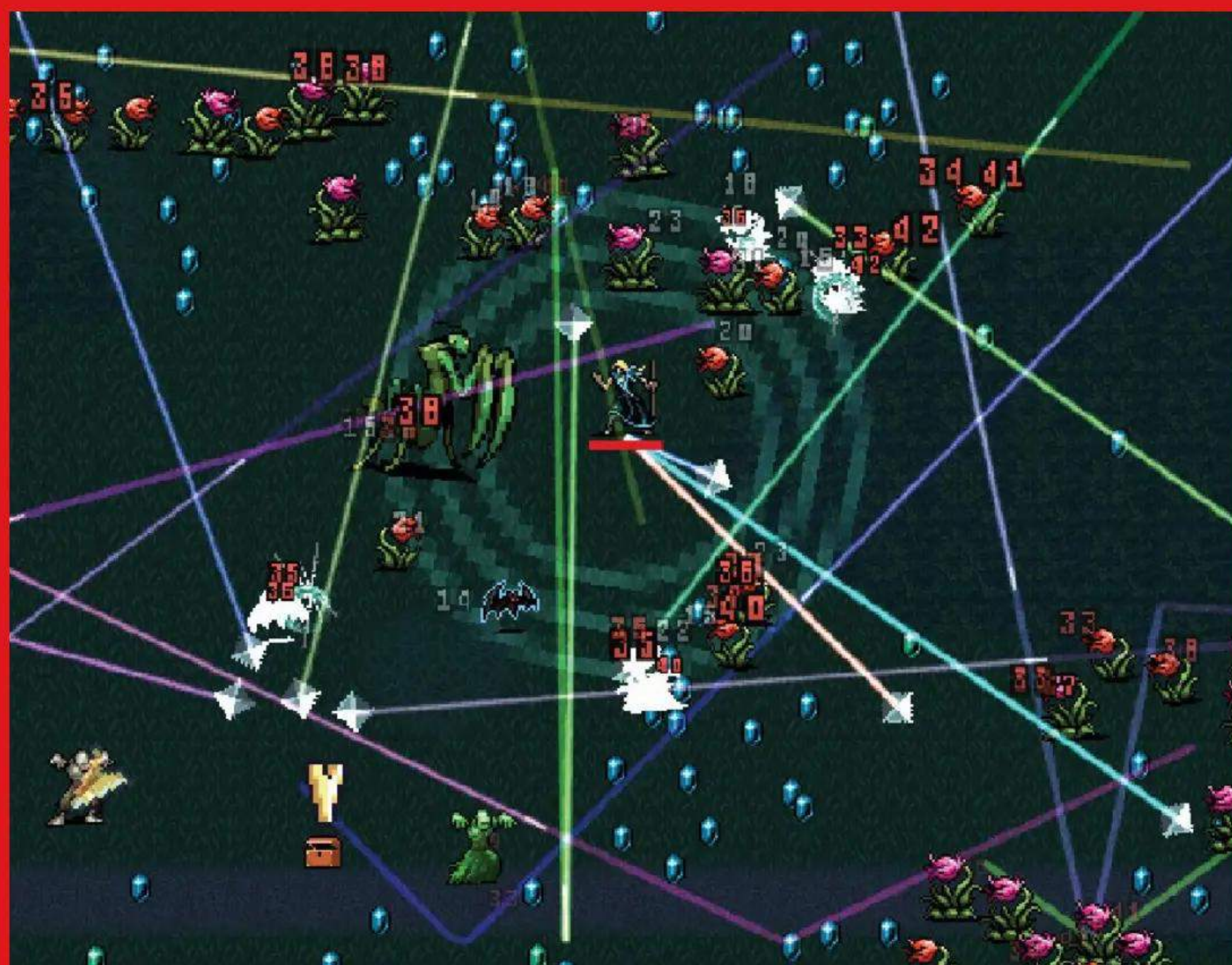
Hotness 6.53

Playability 7.94

Fraser Brown: For a very long time, my Steam Deck was essentially a *Vampire Survivors* machine. It existed purely to fill its screen with gaudy effects and deadly projectiles as I tried to murder death, and anything else in my way. I

lost so much sleep fighting through this bullet hell, and it felt like heaven.

Elie Gould: If you love turning your brain off and fighting the undead as much as I do, then *Vampire Survivors* is a must-play.



39

RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.71

Jacob Ridley: Sucked in by the art style of *Obra Dinn*, you'll stick around for the engrossing story. A murder mystery that requires genuine thought and careful consideration to complete, or at the very least partially solve, I found myself hooked for hours, and thinking about it when I wasn't playing. No doubt it's a great pick for a long flight with a Steam Deck or ROG Ally.

38

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.02

Sarah James: While *World of Warcraft* set the standard for MMORPGs, the past 20 years haven't been trouble-free. Thankfully, *Dragonflight* helped steer *WoW* back on course after *Shadowlands*.

Harvey Randall: *The War Within* might pull the game back from the brink.

Fraser Brown: I'm still playing 20 years after I started. Help.





37

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.68

Quality 7.81

Importance 8.93

Hotness 7.00

Playability 7.12

Tyler Wilde: I've never finished *Skyrim*'s main quest – blah blah dragonborn, whatever – but the dozens of hours I've spent in this open-world RPG include some of my favourite gaming memories. *Starfield* didn't bring about the same 'I just wanna hang out in this world, maybe become a vampire' feeling, so it isn't just something all sufficiently large Bethesda games possess. *Skyrim*'s special.

Mollie Taylor: I continue to be convinced that *Skyrim* is the ultimate comfort game and I won't hear anything otherwise. There's something ultra cosy about mounting a near-vertical cliff on your horse, gentle music playing in the background, and frantically mashing jump in an attempt to climb over the mountain instead of hoofing it around on the path like a normal person.



36

STELLARIS

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.94

Fraser Brown: *Stellaris* attempts to condense every sci-fi fantasy you've ever had into a single grand strategy 4X. A race of eggheads who get taken over by the machines they built, fanatical feudal space empires, nanite swarms, alien hives consuming the entire galaxy – it tries to do everything. Not always successfully, mind, but it's always absurdly ambitious and deft at telling cosmic stories of conquest, intrigue and discovery. It also spawned easily the best *Star Trek* game in the incredible *New Horizons* mod.

Robin Valentine: The game already felt like it covered a huge spectrum of sci-fi ideas back in 2016. So it's been pretty incredible to see how far it's expanded from there.



35

COUNTER-STRIKE 2

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.12

Rich Stanton: Valve promised more with CS2 than it has yet delivered, but that means this is merely the best competitive shooter on the planet, with some genuinely new touches like the fancy smoke physics nestling alongside QoL improvements to things like the HUD and Buy menu. CS2 is my favourite shooter by a mile: but this is hopefully just the beginning.

T100P
2024

34

FINAL FANTASY XIV

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.30

Quality 7.63 Importance 8.10 Hotness 8.30 Playability 7.75

Harvey Randall: *Dawntrail* might have floundered on the story, but its actual content so far has been some of the best the game's ever gotten – *A Realm Reborn* to *Endwalker* is one of the best RPG stories out there, and maybe one of my favourite fantasy tales ever. A single dialogue prompt had me ugly-crying. I've given 4,000 hours to this game and I only want a handful back – here's to 4,000 more.

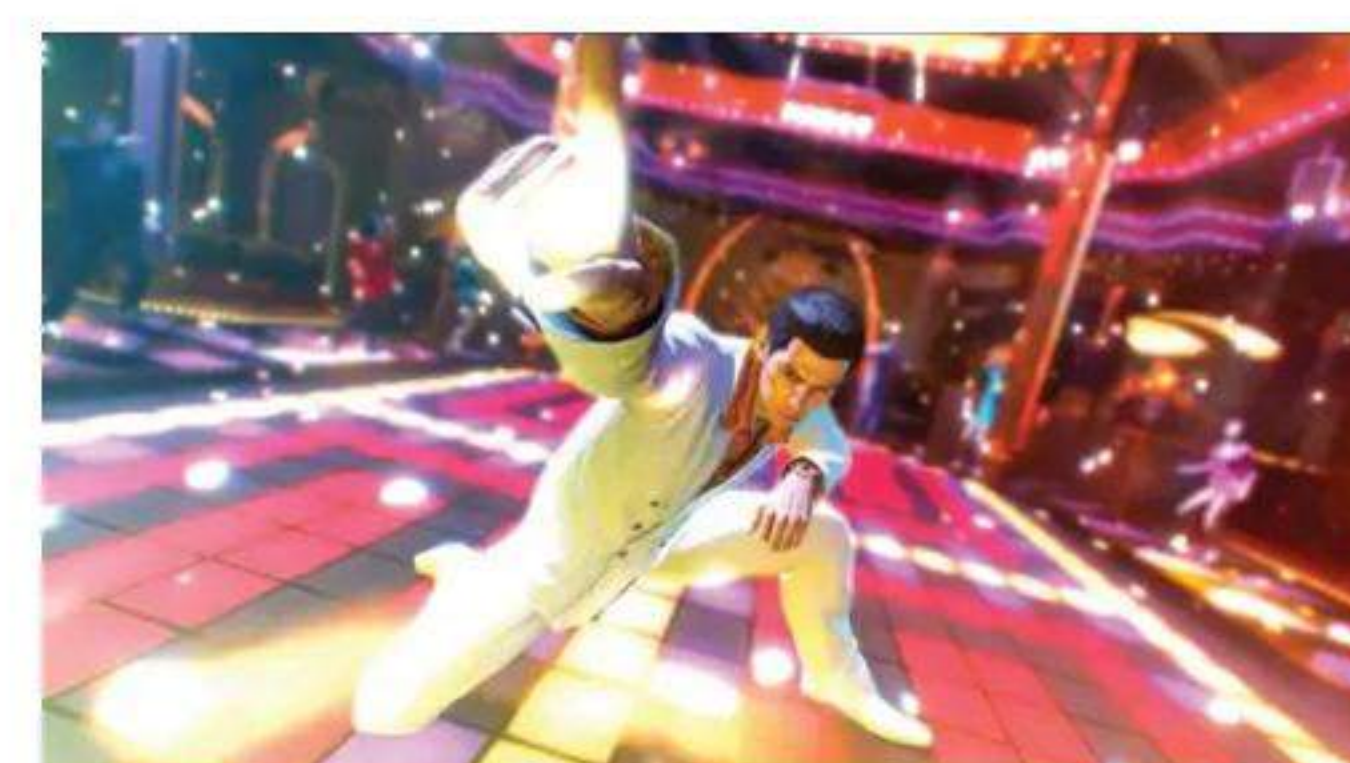
Sarah James: I'm still upset that I don't play this.

Mollie Taylor: *FFXIV* remains the only game that has managed to squeeze quadruple playtime digits. I may have taken a break during *Endwalker* but I'm fully back on the *Dawntrail* train. The dungeons and raids this expansion have been a blast so far, and I can only see it getting better from here.

33 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.75

Jody Macgregor: Like everyone else, the *Fallout* TV show made me want to replay the *Fallout* games. To my surprise, I didn't enjoy returning to the original. The way you could avoid fights with a high Speech skill was groundbreaking at the time, but too often it just meant bad guys saying, "For some reason, I believe you," then QUEST COMPLETE. Meanwhile, *New Vegas* includes a scene where your brain gets removed and replaced by a computer and you have to talk it into returning to your skull because it's enjoying this Brain Brexit where it gets to stay in a jar that doesn't get shot at every five minutes, unlike your head, which does. So yeah, *New Vegas* is the *Fallout* I recommend playing today.



32 YAKUZA 0

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.88

Lauren Morton: The *Yakuza* series is all about street toughs ripping their shirts off, smacking each other with traffic cones, stopping to do some disco dance minigames, and then imparting lessons about friendship. And this prequel with its '80s glamour and fresh-faced protagonists is still the best entry point thanks to a heart-wrenching main story.





31 STARCRAFT 2

RELEASED 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.18

Rich Stanton: I ended up losing years of my gaming life to the competitive side of SC2. Nothing compares to its constant juggle of macro and micro, triumph and panic, fear and glory: that sense of a true one-on-one matchup that tests every skill you both have and, win or lose, somehow always ends with a “GG”. The best competitive RTS there has ever been.

30 HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.50

Wes Fenlon: I’m tempted to play *Halo Infinite*’s finally-good multiplayer, but it can’t beat the package of nearly every prior *Halo* campaign and multiplayer put together, with custom game browsers and modding support.

Elie Gould: This deserves recognition for bringing my favourite (and the best) *Halo* game of all time, *Halo Reach*, to PC.



28 THIEF GOLD

TOP 100 SCORE 236.49

Andy Chalk: *Thief* is the one game that will make me grab you by the collar and scream, “Play it on expert or stop wasting your time!” That’s the essence of *Thief*: if you want the real game – and I mean that literally, not just in a “you cheated yourself” sense – you have to jump into the deep end.

27 HUNT: SHOWDOWN

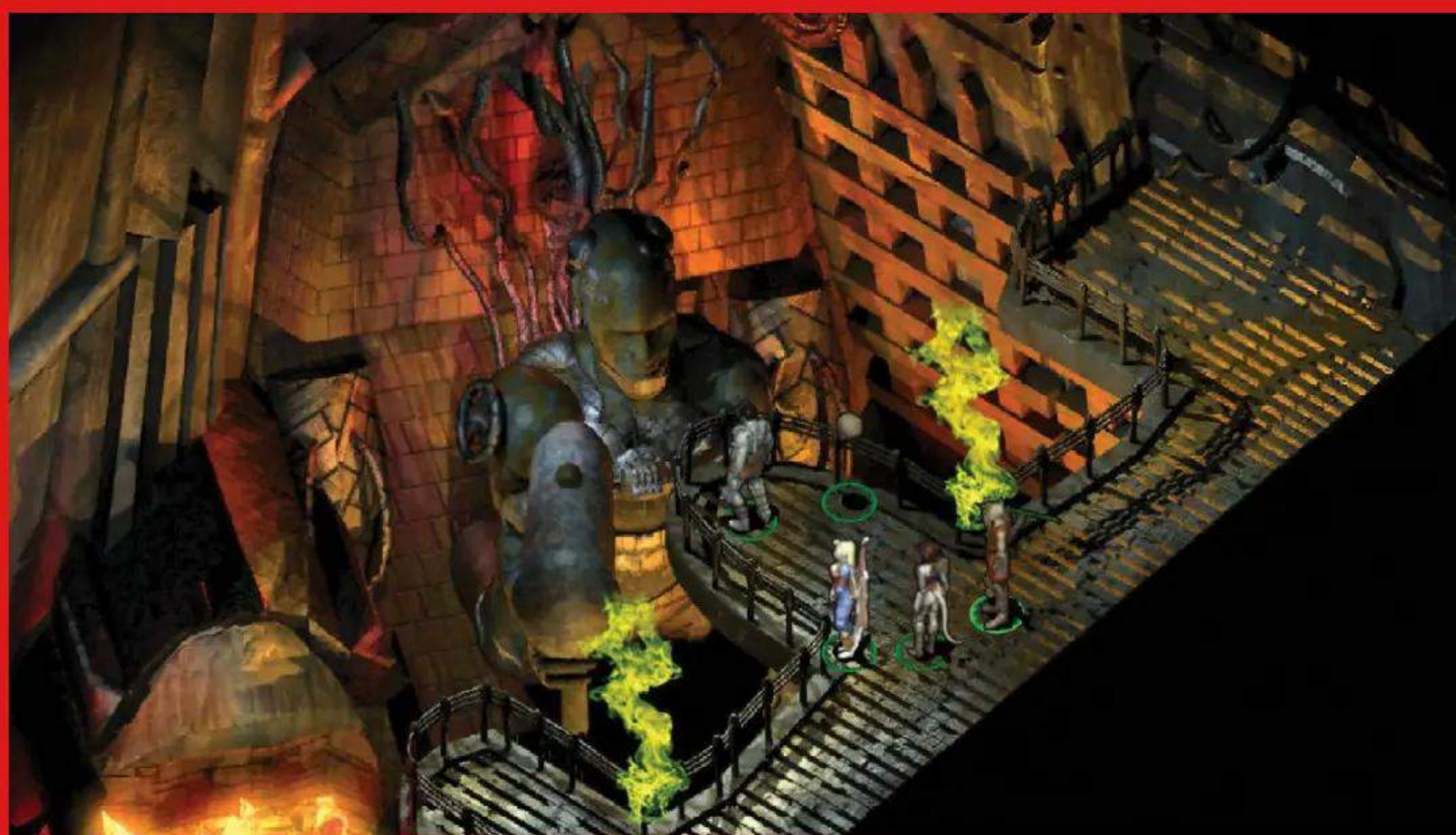
TOP 100 SCORE 236.76

Morgan Park: You bet our favourite extraction shooter made the list. *Hunt: Showdown* is in a transition phase as Crytek prepares to move the game to a newer engine, but we’re still playing and loving this one-of-a-kind cowboy shooter weekly, and enjoying its expanding arsenal of 19th century guns.

26 PIZZA TOWER

TOP 100 SCORE 237.00

Ted Litchfield: It’s hard to get excited about a new 2D platformer: they’ve been done. But *Pizza Tower* shows there’s still magic to be had in the genre. Every level surprises you with a gimmick that could support a full game, while the ’90s Cartoon Network art and Dreamcast-y soundtrack are killer.



29

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999 | TOP 100 SCORE 236.43

Quality 9.14

Importance 7.71

Hotness 4.14

Playability 6.17

Jody Macgregor: *Torment* took the engine *Baldur’s Gate* was built on, but stripped out the trad fantasy trappings. Instead of drinking healing potions you get hit points back by eating blood flies and the available weapons include a severed limb and upgradeable teeth for your companion, who is just a skull. *Torment* is *Dungeons & Dragons* minus the elves and gnomes, plus the maddest shit you’ve ever heard.

Joshua Wolens: *Disco Elysium* before there was *Disco Elysium*. Thoughtful,

gorgeous, and with some of the best boss dialogue in gaming history. Shame about the actual boss battles, eh? Turn the difficulty down low and enjoy it as the visual novel it’s meant to be.

Ted Litchfield: Cerebral RPGs of this vintage loved self-sabotaging with the most filler combat you’ve ever seen, but *Torment* makes it worth your while. My favourite moment is paying off a bar tab to get back your eyeball from a past life before doing some impromptu ocular surgery.

T100P

2024

25

CRUSADER KINGS 3

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.10

Quality 8.50

Importance 7.18

Hotness 6.10

Playability 8.11

Fraser Brown: It may have fallen down the list a wee bit, but Paradox's irrepressible anecdote generator is still at the top in my heart. Even the less celebrated DLCs have given me an excuse to come back, adding plagues and propaganda masquerading as legends, but the core of this medieval grand strategy RPG is so wonderful that I really don't need many reasons for frequent revisits. Where else will I get to plot the assassination of my brother while I'm participating in a jousting tournament and hooking up with a Satanist who is also my tax collector? It's certainly never boring.



24

PORTAL

RELEASED 2007 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.53

Tyler Wilde: Call it baby bear porridge, because Valve's first-person puzzle classic is just right: just long enough to thoroughly explore its brain-twisting physics concept, with just the right frequency of gags to keep it funny for the whole duration – and I think that's still true today, when most internet comedy from the '00s seems unbearably corny.



23

SEKIRO:
SHADOWS DIE TWICE

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.87

Wes Fenlon: This game is full of beautiful dualities. Patient stealth is followed by arterial-blood-spraying executions. It demands true mastery of the sword and parry timings, yet also allows you to cheese bosses with an umbrella. At one point you fight a giant ape, and then – get this – another ape shows up. My actual favourite FromSoft game.

Harvey Randall: *Shadows Die Twice* is such a focused game. In your typical soulslike, FromSoftware has to account for a glut of builds – but not so here. The studio knows what tools you have, and with that knowledge is able to craft some all-timer boss fights that have barely seen competition since.



22

HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.06

Quality 8.08

Importance 7.92

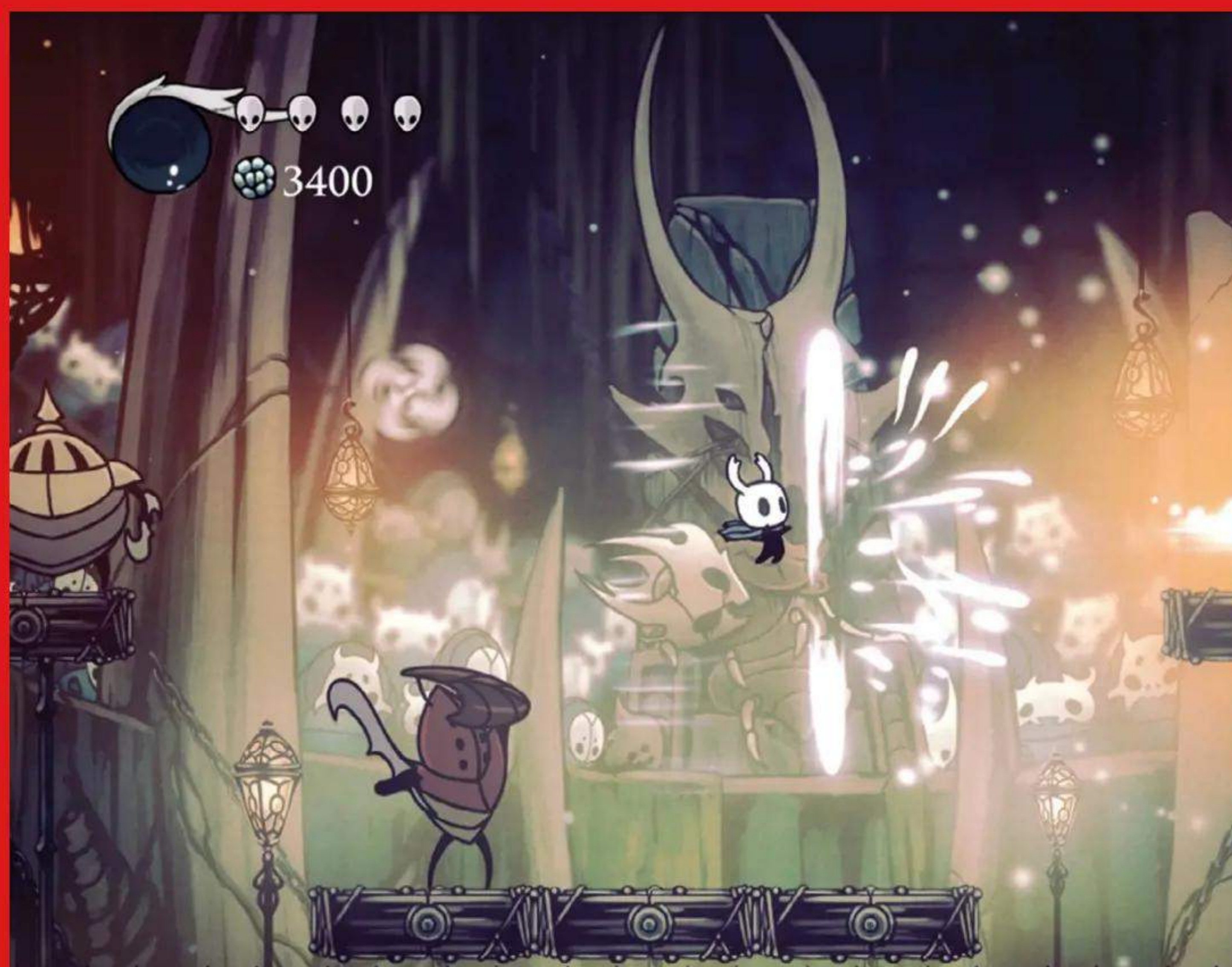
Hotness 7.50

Playability 7.73

Kara Phillips: I didn't think much of metroidvanias before going into *Hollow Knight*, but I quickly found a home in Hallownest. One of the only games to drive me to pure fury during a boss fight, it still had me coming back to try again.

Plus, it's got an incredible soundtrack that never loses its charm no matter how many times you listen to it.

Harvey Randall: Proof that a game can have a lot of bugs in it and still be really good.



PERSONAL PICK

Joshua Wolens



ALPHA PROTOCOL

I fought hard to get AP on the top 100 this year (there was even a PowerPoint), but the PCG deep state conspired against me. Okay, fine, I'll cop to parts of the gameplay being downright busted – woe betide anyone who doesn't spec into pistols and stealth – but Obsidian's espionage RPG still does choice and consequence like no other game can, and the fact we never got a sequel that fixed its missteps is a crime.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage



SHADOW GAMBIT: THE CURSED CREW

Mimimi's final game is also the peak of the tactical stealth formula the dev has been honing since 2016's *Shadow Tactics*. Here you control a crew of ghost pirates, using their spooky powers to infiltrate islands. Slowly working through the complex guard patrols is as satisfying as ever, but the real joy is in testing out new squad combos and seeing how their unique powers interact.



21 ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.87

Elie Gould: Just when I thought I'd seen it all, *Alan Wake 2* dropped in to show me all the new ways in which a horror game can scare me. But I'd do it all again just to see all the mind-bending cutscenes.

Robin Valentine: I voluntarily stayed in a movie theatre in this game to watch a live-action short horror film entirely in Finnish and loved every minute of it.

20 HADES

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 240.27

Harvey Randall: It's hard to overstate the impact *Hades* had on the roguelike genre – not only is it some of Supergiant's finest work, it also proves that you can tell a strong narrative in a game that ends every time you die.

Elie Gould: After devoting countless hours and all three of my brain cells, I can safely say that all the pain was worth it.



The Top 100

19 SLAY THE SPIRE

TOP 100 SCORE 240.29

Harvey Randall: I have 276 hours logged in Slay the Spire. I regret none of them.

Robin Valentine:

These days I try pretty much every roguelike deckbuilder going, and I have to say, there's still very few that beat this foundational game. Only Balatro has felt as fresh – more on that further down the list.

18 MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY

TOP 100 SCORE 240.61

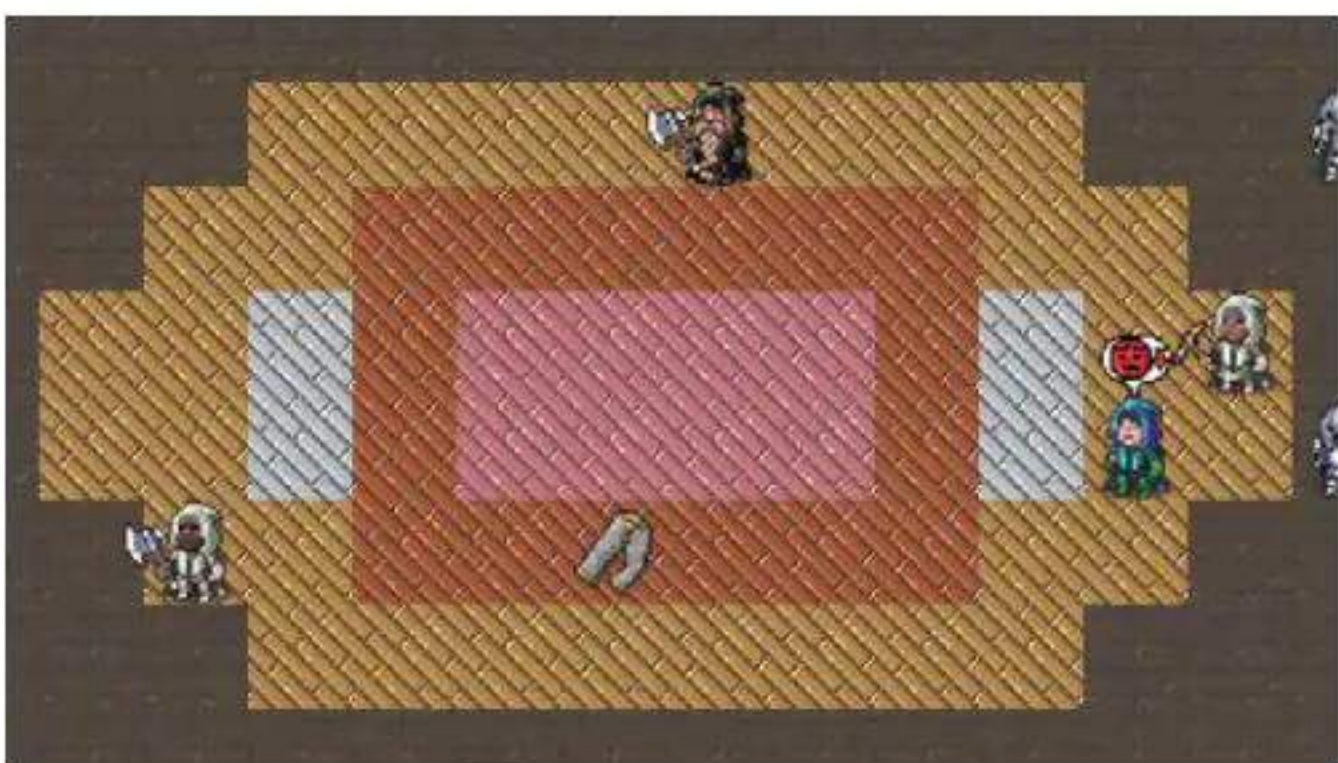
Jody Macgregor: When *Mass Effect* released it confused people who thought it was a shooter with too much talking. It was rare to have competent combat in an RPG back then, or to have one that felt this much like watching TV rather than reading a book. Your favourite sci-fi show: the game.

17 RIMWORLD

TOP 100 SCORE 241.36

Natanael Albuquerque:

If you're into min-max automation games, you'll love simulating an oversized money printer with turrets guarding against super soldiers. And for those of us who prefer life simulation and crafting unique stories, watching your colony implode is a special kind of thrill.



16 DWARF FORTRESS

RELEASED 2006 | TOP 100 SCORE 244.0

Wes Fenlon: The Steam version of this mantle-deep colony sim now features the underappreciated Adventure mode, a roguelike RPG that lets you venture forth into the world you generated for your fortress. You could play as a dwarf, but why, when being a cockatiel man is on the table? Beyond that addition, *Dwarf Fortress* remains the Platonic ideal of storytelling.

15 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 244.20

Kara Phillips: The adult equivalent of playing pretend cowboys, except it will emotionally destroy you. It's also a great wildlife-watching/foraging game if you ignore all the outlaws and guns, and the emotional turmoil.

Sean Martin: I'm still distraught Rockstar stopped supporting Red Dead Online; nothing beat pretending to be a cowpoke with pals.



14 HELLDIVERS 2

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 245.18

Quality 8.13

Importance 8.25

Hotness 8.24

Playability 8.20

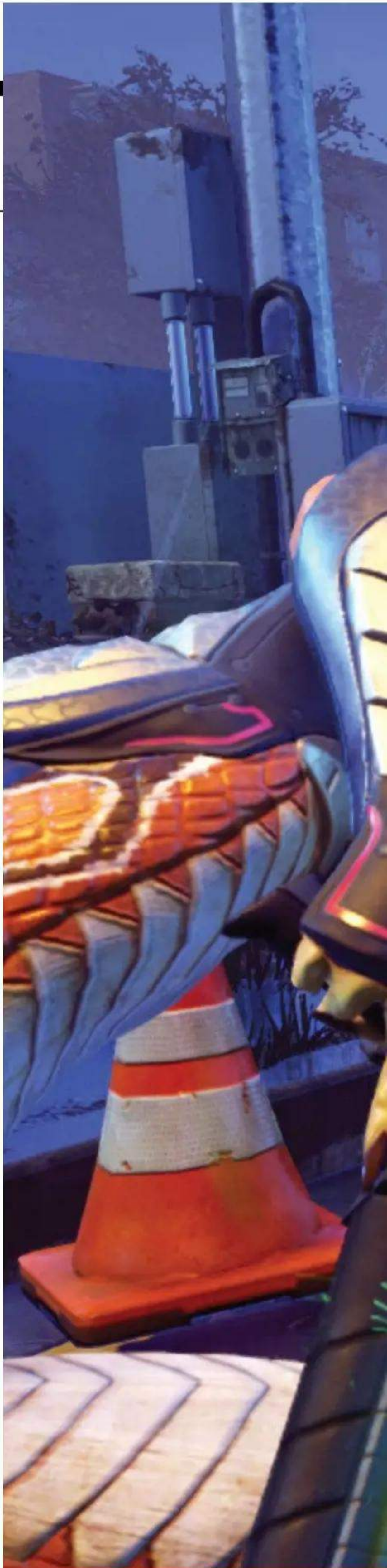
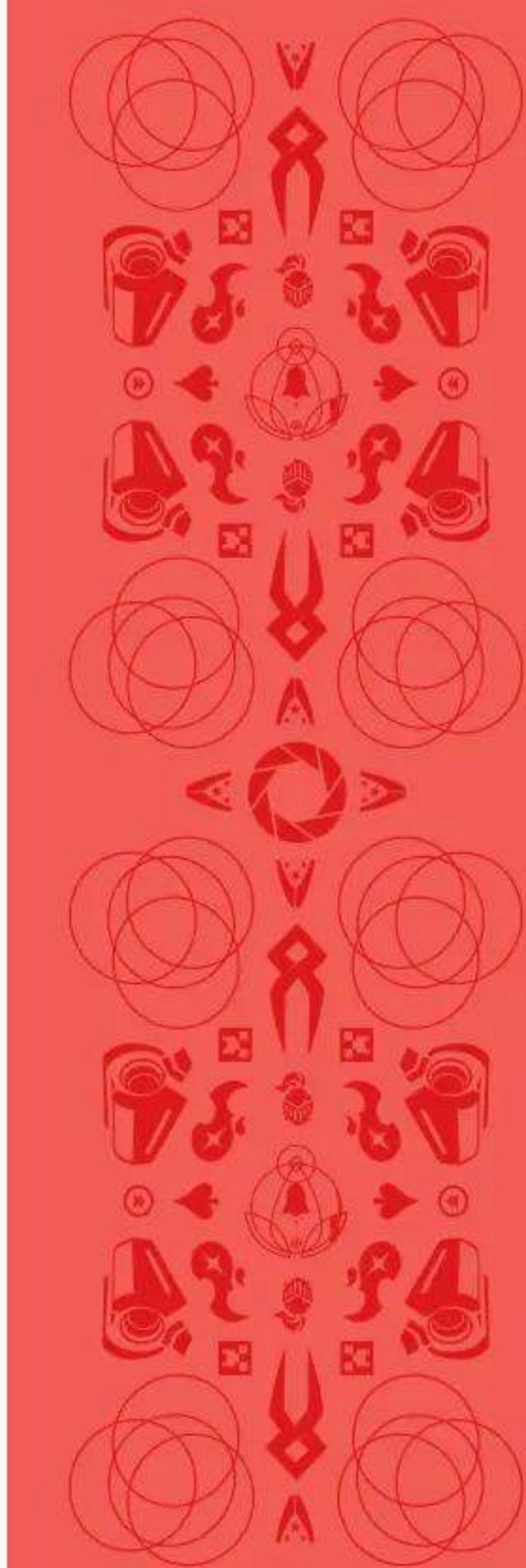
Harvey Randall: Arrowhead has a lot of stuff to figure out – namely, how it'll handle all eyes being on it going forward – but *Helldivers 2* remains an absolute triumph in every way that matters. Being a scrappy little trooper in a hellscape of blood, metal and acid is almost always a riot.

Sean Martin: Before *Helldivers 2*, my peak co-op shooter was *Deep Rock Galactic*, and though I still have a fondness for space dwarves, fighting a never-ending galactic war has won me

over. From its sleek stratagems to its packed-sandboxes, *Helldivers 2* really is a must for any fan of co-op shooters and egregious friendly fire.

Jake Tucker: As an Arrowhead fan since *Magicka*, seeing *Helldivers 2* explode has been a joy. Arrowhead's classic DNA is here: failure is fun, and sometimes you'll fail accidentally on purpose to see what a bomb does to your comrades.

Morgan Park: *Helldivers 2* is my game of the year so far, and I'd be amazed if anything beats it.



13

XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.21 | PROMOTED BY Robin Valentine

Quality 8.61

Importance 7.53

Hotness 5.56

Playability 7.76

Robin Valentine: I had to fight to keep *XCOM 2* this high on the list, but by god it deserves it. Eight years on, after countless imitators, it's still the king of the tactical strategy genre and honestly it isn't even close. It ages like fine wine – still feels great to go back to, and only generates more and more amazing mod content to ensure you've always got something new to see. I've keenly felt the absence of a proper *XCOM 3* or even a worthy successor, but it's hard to be too sad when I can just boot this up and have as much fun as ever.

12 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 3

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.60

Sean Martin: In a genre as hit-and-miss as the RTS, *Total War: Warhammer* continues to thrive as one of the best *Total War* games and a menagerie of all-round fantasy goodness. Immortal Empires has become the de facto way to play; a grand campaign combining all three games' races and maps. Since you only need *Total War: Warhammer 3* to play Immortal Empires now, it's exceptional value, letting you face off against three games' worth of content.

Jody Macgregor: It's been argued games like *Devil May Cry* should be called spectacle fighters. When daemoniac leather freaks fight lizards riding dinosaurs, *Warhammer 3* approaches spectacle strategy.



11 METAL GEAR SOLID 3 – MASTER COLLECTION

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.76

Joshua Wolens: The simplest *Metal Gear Solid* story is also the series' best. *MGS3* swaps the second game's conga line of twists (mostly) for a Cold War spy tragedy about a man on a quest to kill the person he loves most in the world, and chucks in some peerless boss fights along the way. A halfhearted PC port, sure, but its greatness shines through anyway.

PERSONAL PICK

Sean Martin



DARK SOULS 3

So, you like *Elden Ring* and want to try out *Dark Souls*? Don't go back to the first game; go to the third. *Elden Ring* owes its greatness to the culmination of the *Souls* series, and besides having FromSoftware's best DLC it still plays well today. Perfect if you're already well versed in *Elden Ring*'s combat and want a new challenge to undertake.

PERSONAL PICK

Morgan Park



HALO INFINITE

I failed to lobby for *Halo Infinite* to make the list this year, despite its multiplayer finally getting really good. I've put nearly 150 years into the game since last year, and almost all of that time has been spent enjoying its huge variety of modes and maps. The map pool, in particular, has exploded with original and throwback maps created by the Forge community.

10

DOOM (1993)

RELEASED 1993 | TOP 100 SCORE 247.51

Quality 8.41

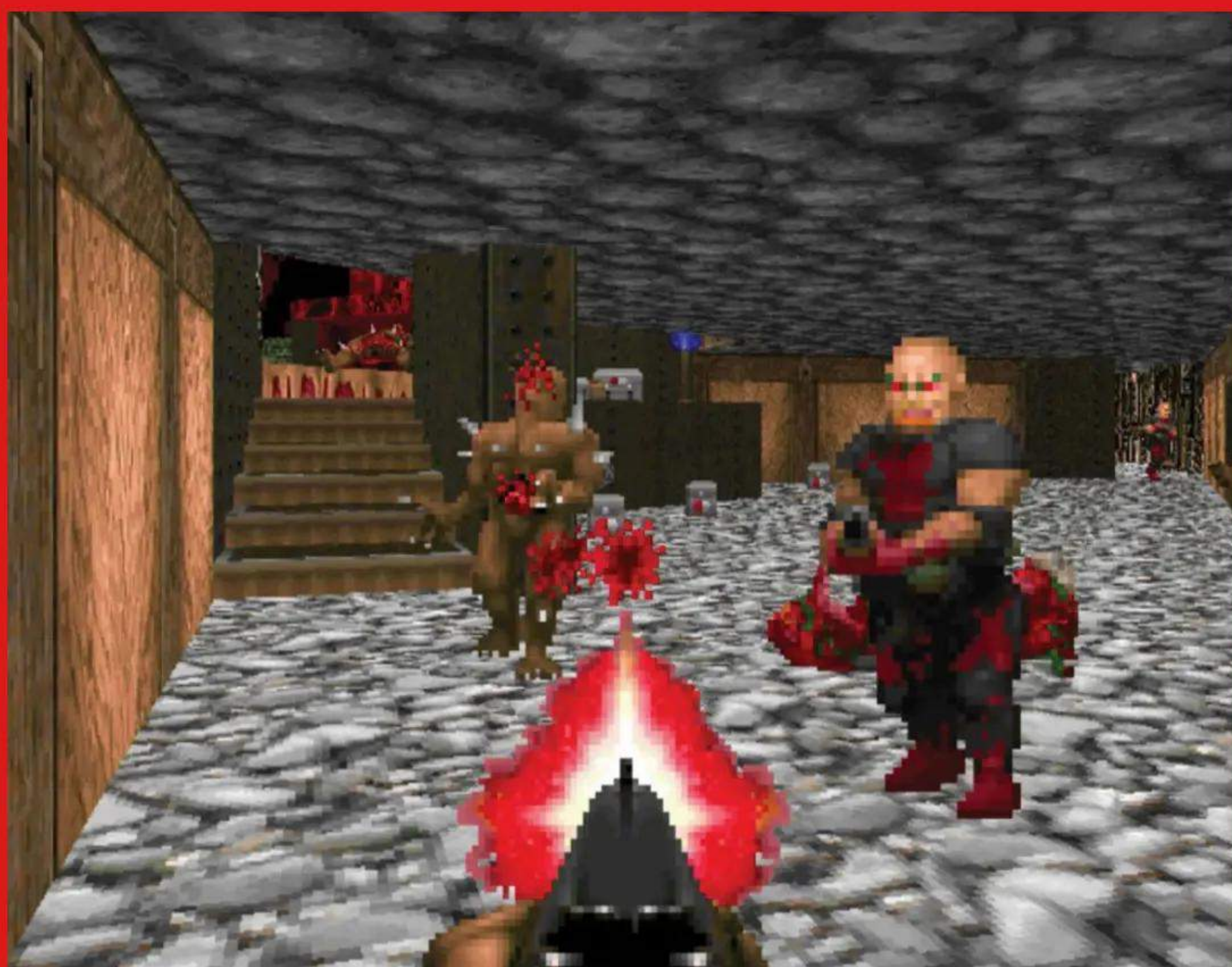
Importance 10.0

Hotness 6.81

Playability 6.81

Wes Fenlon: The purity of *Doom*'s shooting and serpentine levels appropriately earned it one of only two perfect scores for Importance this year. How could you rate it anything less? The real reason to play *Doom* today is its

mod scene, which is still cranking out masterpieces 30 years later (play *Myhouse.wad*!). Most modders build on *Doom 2*, so consider this a vote for the duo: both still belong on any PC (or printer, or pregnancy test) in 2024.



9

STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 248.03

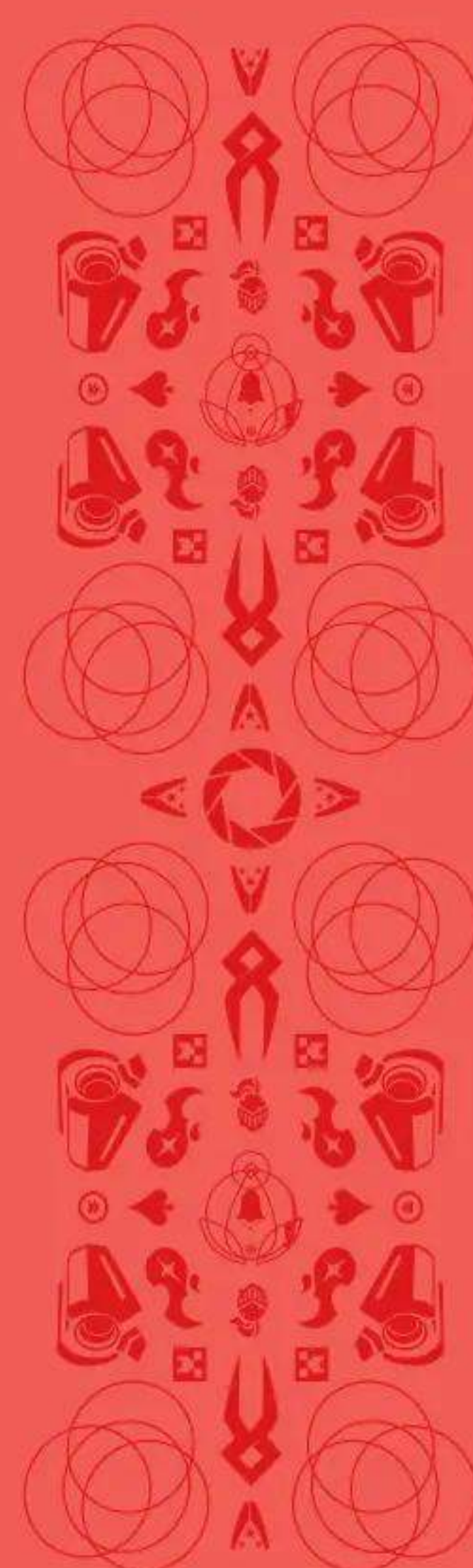
Kara Phillips: Serving as the ruler of all farming simulators, *Stardew Valley* deserves a top-ten spot. Eight years after its launch the game is more popular than ever, welcoming well-versed farmers and entirely new players with open arms. And, with the scale of updates still being rolled out, even after hundreds of hours I still find new things to love about it.

8

BALATRO

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 254.82

Robin Valentine: I was starting to think *Slay the Spire*'s reign was never going to end, but I think *Balatro* might genuinely have taken its place in my heart. On the surface it appears so unassuming, but you soon realise it's using those simple playing cards as the basis for adventures as wild and tense and mind-bending as any more fantastical deckbuilder.



7

HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 256.61

Quality 9.10

Importance 9.53

Hotness 6.00

Playability 7.65

Phil Savage: It's nearly two decades old, but *Half-Life 2* is still one of the best FPS campaigns ever made. There are plenty of shooters with better feeling guns, or more exciting combat, but all too few have learned the important lessons about variety and pace taught by Valve's all-timer. Each level is a classic, exploring different ideas to memorable effect – finding fun new uses for the tools it provides.

And the legacy of *Half-Life 2* extends beyond the games that have tried (and often failed) to imitate it. Its mod scene was responsible for entirely new genres – total conversions like *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable* showcasing new ways to tell videogame stories.



6

THE WITCHER 3

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 257.66

Ted Litchfield: It was one of those gamer forum stereotypes: "Why don't they just put the good writing and stuff from BioWare games in an open world like *Skyrim*?" But then CD Projekt Red went and did it. The studio somehow pushed the envelope on cinematic storytelling while filling out a vast and engrossing open world. Even as Larian breaks new ground in open-ended reactivity, CDPR remains the top dog in the BioWare-style action RPG.

Andy Chalk: I waited years to play *The Witcher 3* because after the first two games – which I loved – I knew my time with it had to be perfect. And it was: a sublime, satisfying conclusion to one of the greatest videogame adventures of all time.



5

PERSONA 5 ROYAL

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 258.38

Phil Savage: An effortlessly stylish JRPG. *Persona 5* is the standout of Atlus's unique blend of high-school life sim and turn-based dungeon crawler. It's bolder and more brash, but the real improvement is to combat. Bring the right squad, and you'll feel absurdly powerful, wiping out your foes before they even get a chance to respond.

T
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4

MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 258.50

Quality 8.57 Importance 9.95
Hotness 7.70 Playability 8.26

Kara Phillips: For a game that's all about stacking blocks, *Minecraft* is unmatched in holding its charm and the attention of its players. The creativity of the community helps make the experience whole.

Lauren Morton: *Minecraft* deserves its place on this list for still being so all-round good. There's no debating its importance – we have it to thank for the flourishing survival crafting genre. And though it's not as hot as it once was, it remains a household name I can use to explain to non-gaming adults what I do for a living.

3

ELDEN RING

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 259.81

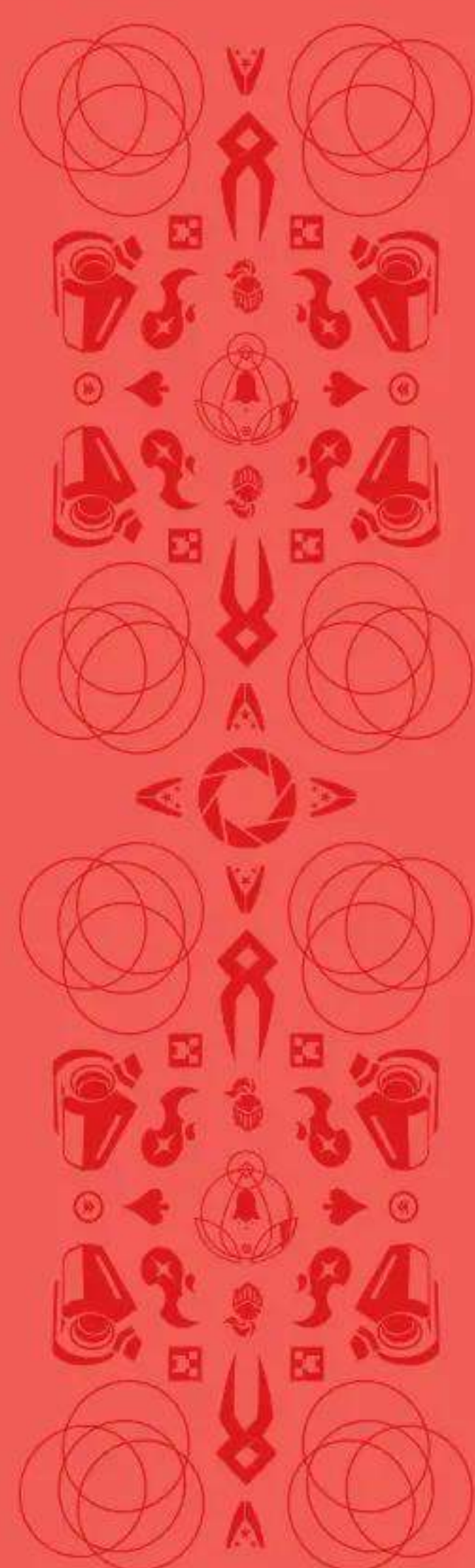
Quality 8.68 Importance 8.65 Hotness 9.17 Playability 7.77

Fraser Brown: FromSoftware at its most audacious and unrestrained, *Elden Ring* is the pinnacle of the genre the studio created. With the huge *Shadow of the Erdtree* expansion, it's now effectively two interconnected games, and both will ruin your life.

Elie Gould: I can't remember the last time I dedicated every waking moment to a game and didn't get bored, even when hunting invisible turtles.

Ted Litchfield: I've beaten it three times, coming up on two clears of the expansion, and there's no end in sight. There are so many characters and builds I want to try, I want to beat NG+ with my first dude, I just started a Seamless Co-op run. You know what might help me move on? A *Bloodborne* PC port.





Two cops and a body. So far, so conventional.

2

DISCO ELYSIUM

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 264.84

Quality 9.29

Importance 9.14

Hotness 6.60

Playability 8.95

Ted Litchfield: In People Make Games' documentary about the fracturing of developer ZA/UM and the legal battle for ownership of *Disco Elysium*, one of the game's writers, Argo Tuulik, said that setting creator Robert Kurvitz "has this uncanny ability to conceptualise things that already exist in a way that they seem completely fresh and new".

That's one of my favourite things about this RPG: it's somehow pressing, anarchic and punk while also feeling measured, mournful, almost anthropological in its fictional history. It's a world with its own physics and technology, but the same political philosophies as our own, with a bizarre alternate world war and looming ecological

catastrophe that make you look at our real ones with fresh eyes. And all that's just set dressing!

It's always felt bitterly ironic that *Disco Elysium's* success should prove as ambiguous, melancholy, and charged with issues of class and politics as anything in the game itself.

Joshua Wolens: Still #1 in my heart. *Disco Elysium* is a game about the return of history after the long

tenure of grey moderate men in grey moderate clothes. The revolution died, the communards were lined up and shot, and for a while it really felt like everything could be administered by market forces in perpetuity. History is over; the handbrake is on.

Except whoops! History has no handbrake. It was only by quiet and colossal violence that the pleasant technocrats of the world gummed up the wheels enough to keep the locomotive in place for a few decades. *Disco Elysium* takes place when that violence is boiling over into the streets, tearing the old order apart and giving rise to something new. It's a miracle we even got one game this good, in this setting, from these people.

A BIZARRE ALTERNATE WORLD WAR AND LOOMING CATASTROPHE



...but there's very little else that's conventional here.

T100
20



1

BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 275.95

Quality 9.24 Importance 9.38 Hotness 9.07 Playability 8.86

Fraser Brown: I mean, of course it's *Baldur's Gate 3*, right? *Disco Elysium's* incredible run at the top of this list had to end eventually, and when *BG3* launched last year I knew this would be the giant slayer.

BG3 is so much more than a game we've waited decades for – especially since it's really a sequel in name only. It stands on its own at the top of RPG Mountain, propped up by Larian's years of experimentation in the *Divinity* series and the huge legacy of tabletop role-playing games. The result: the most RPG of all RPGs, boasting the kind of freedom you only get with extremely permissive DMs, but with the kind of writing and world-building and character development that you only get with a best-in-class team of scribes.

Harvey Randall: In an era when every RPG has a parry, dodge roll, and conversation wheel (except for *Disco Elysium* but hey, look what's at #2) Larian has well and truly trounced the idea that tactical CRPGs are a thing of the past.

It helps that it's a gorgeously-written, acted, and presented game. Companion characters are

vibrantly voiced, beautifully performed, and meticulously animated. I already adored my first journey through the Sword Coast, and then Larian went ahead and updated the dang thing – adding an epilogue that turned a slightly wonky final few minutes into a heartfelt love letter to my investment in its story.

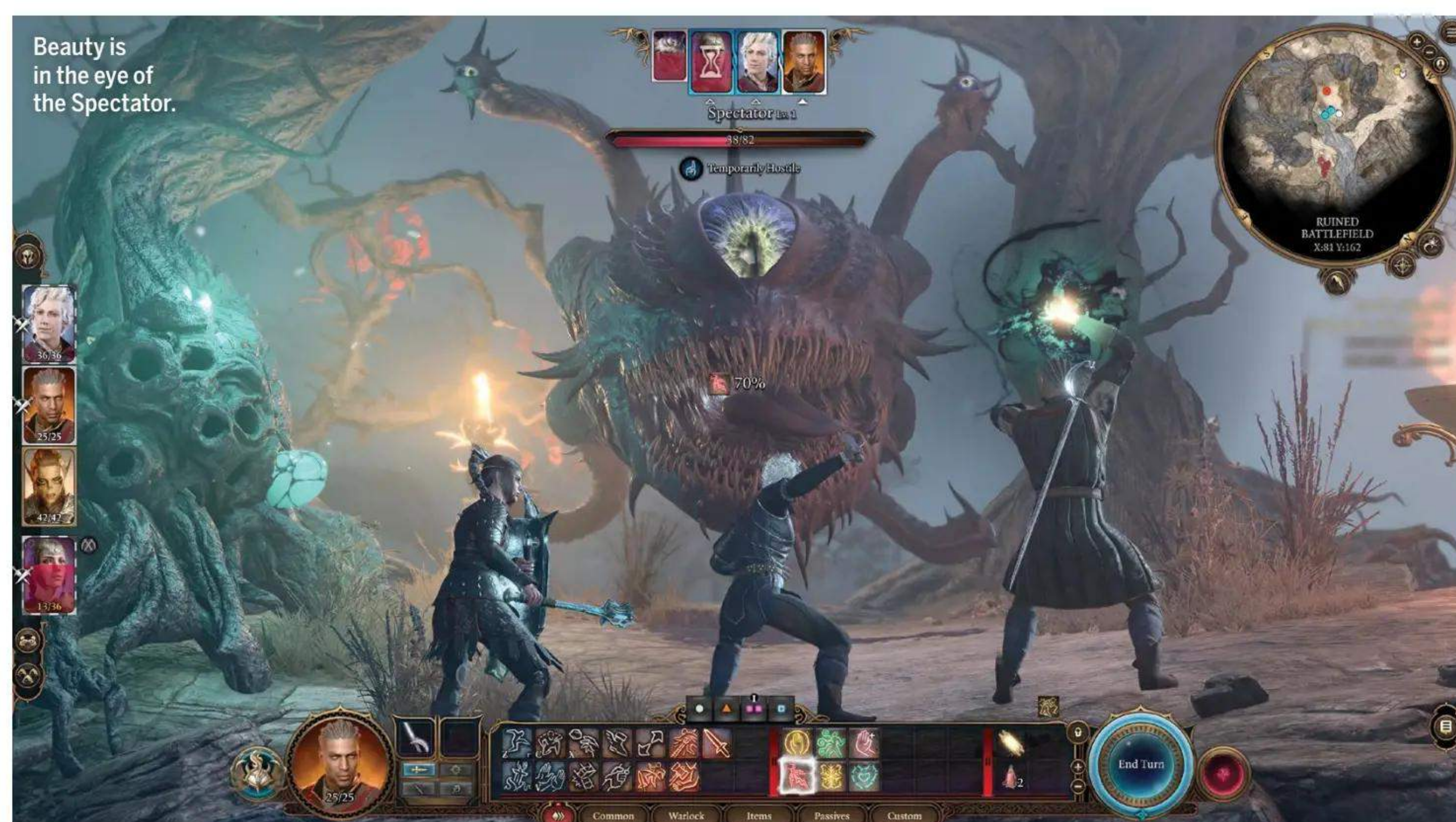
BG3 IS SO MUCH MORE THAN A GAME WE'VE WAITED DECADES FOR

Ted Litchfield: The thing that sticks with me the most about *Baldur's Gate 3* one year later is that it never compromises, and in doing so upends 20 years of received wisdom from RPG fans and devs. Depth vs approachability, reactivity vs production values, mass appeal vs RPG sicko appeal. Even people who love complicated, deep CRPGs seemed to take it as given that they'd never sell well, that the

things we want from them limit their audience.

In the last five years, we've seen two of the best to ever do it in *Disco Elysium* and *Baldur's Gate 3*. Both games blew all expectations about their sales and popular impact out of the water. I'd always felt like I missed the party on CRPGs, that no matter how good the new ones might be, classics from 20 years ago would never be beaten. It's been wonderful to be proven wrong.

Tyler Wilde: I also love how uncompromising it is, even when it refuses to compromise on things that aren't worth defending. D&D 5e definitely doesn't have the greatest tabletop combat system ever invented, yet *Baldur's Gate 3* goes to absurd lengths to replicate it faithfully. The audacity is part of the fun. If you're a D&D player, it's satisfying to find things working the way you know, even if it means disregarding contemporary notions of 'good videogame design,' and if you're not a D&D player, you get to experience an approximation of freeform tabletop combat and credibly complain about D&D's combat rules – metamorphosis!



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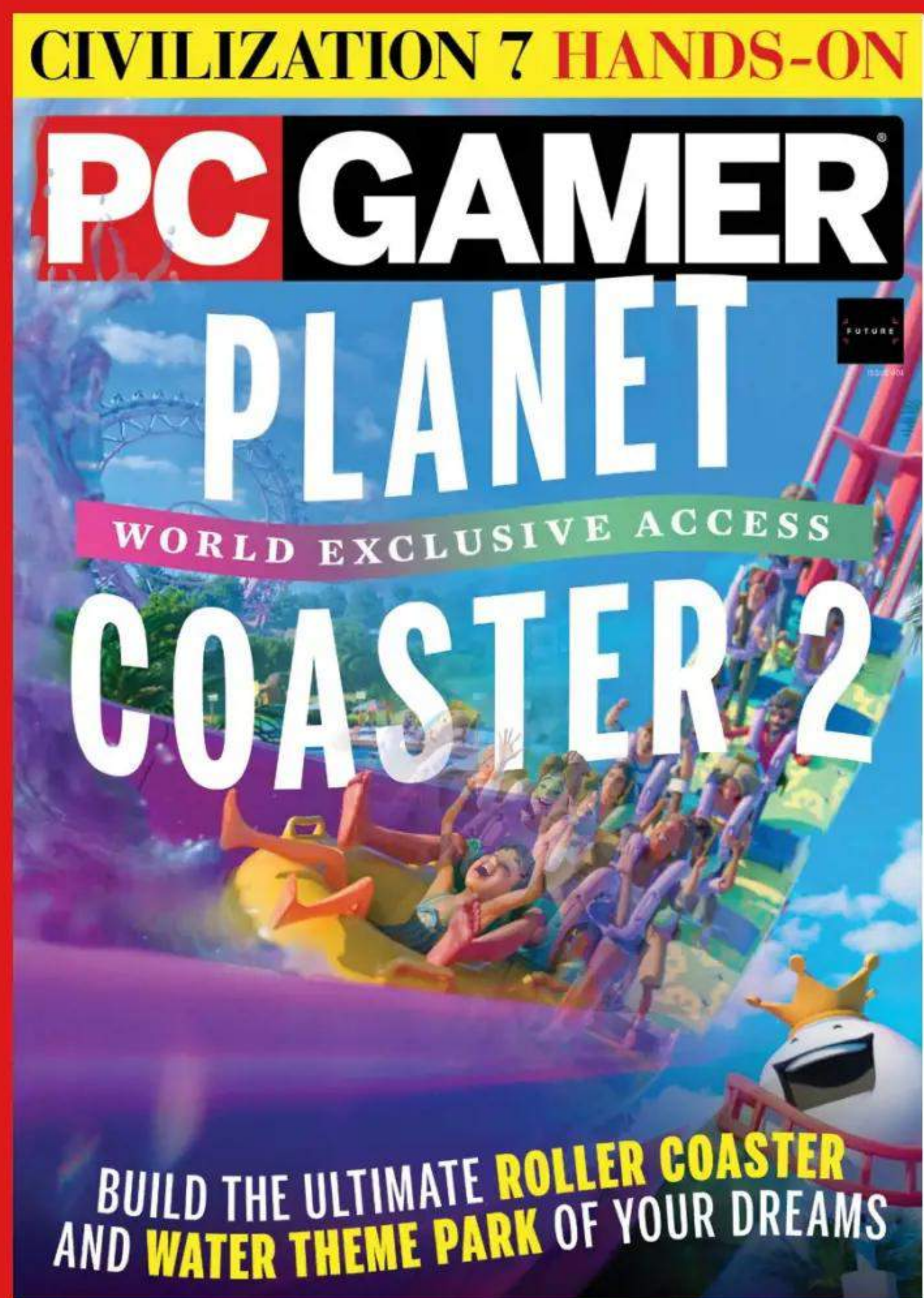
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THE HISTORY OF Grand theft auto

With **GRAND THEFT
AUTO VI** finally,
officially revealed.
PC Gamer charts
the rise, rise, and
rise of one
of gaming's
biggest series

By Rick Lane





Hello doctor? Tiny cars are driving on the bathroom wall again!

1997

Grand Theft Auto

Where it all began

The project that became *Grand Theft Auto* began life as an isometric fighting simulator similar to *Syndicate Wars*. Too similar, in fact. When Bullfrog made its sci-fi sequel public, *GTA's* developer DMA Design changed trajectory, coming up with a plan for a top-down vehicle game called *Race 'n' Chase*.

Race 'n' Chase's design document describes it as “a fun, addictive and fast multiplayer car racing and crashing game”. But the defining lines in the document have little to do with racing. “It will also be possible for players to get out of their car and steal another one,” the document reads. “This will mean controlling a vulnerable pedestrian for a short time. Trying to steal a car may result in an alarm being set off which will, of course, attract the police.” *Grand Theft Auto's* top-down blend of 2D

sprites and 3D buildings was cutting edge when development started in 1995. But by the time it released in November 1997, the game was visually outdated. Combined with awkward controls, reviews of the game were decidedly mixed. Even DMA's own developers thought the project was unlikely to succeed, with former DMA dev Colin MacDonald admitting there “wasn't a lot of confidence” in the game.

But *Grand Theft Auto* had something that precious few games did in 1997 – a sense of freedom. Yes, you could progress through the game's linear sequence of missions. But you could also make money by stealing cars and selling them at the local docks, run over pedestrians just for the hell of it, and lead the police on a merry chase. This freedom shone through the game's rough visuals and controls, propelling *Grand Theft Auto* to commercial success.

1999

Grand Theft Auto: London

He's nicked my motor!

In 1998, DMA Design's parent company BMG Interactive was acquired by Take Two Interactive, and a new publishing label named Rockstar Games was established under former BMG executive producer Sam Houser. Rockstar's first project was *GTA: London 1969*, a period mission pack for *Grand Theft Auto* developed by Rockstar Canada.

Essentially the same game with a '60s skin, *GTA: London* received the same criticisms as the original, although it was praised for its soundtrack which captured the vibe of '60s London. *GTA: London* also sees Dan Houser's debut as the series' chief writer, becoming a much more significant role as the series progressed. The expansion was followed in short order by *GTA: London 1961*. Set eight years earlier and featuring the same protagonist, *1961* was a PC exclusive release available for free by download only.



THE HISTORY OF Grand Theft Auto

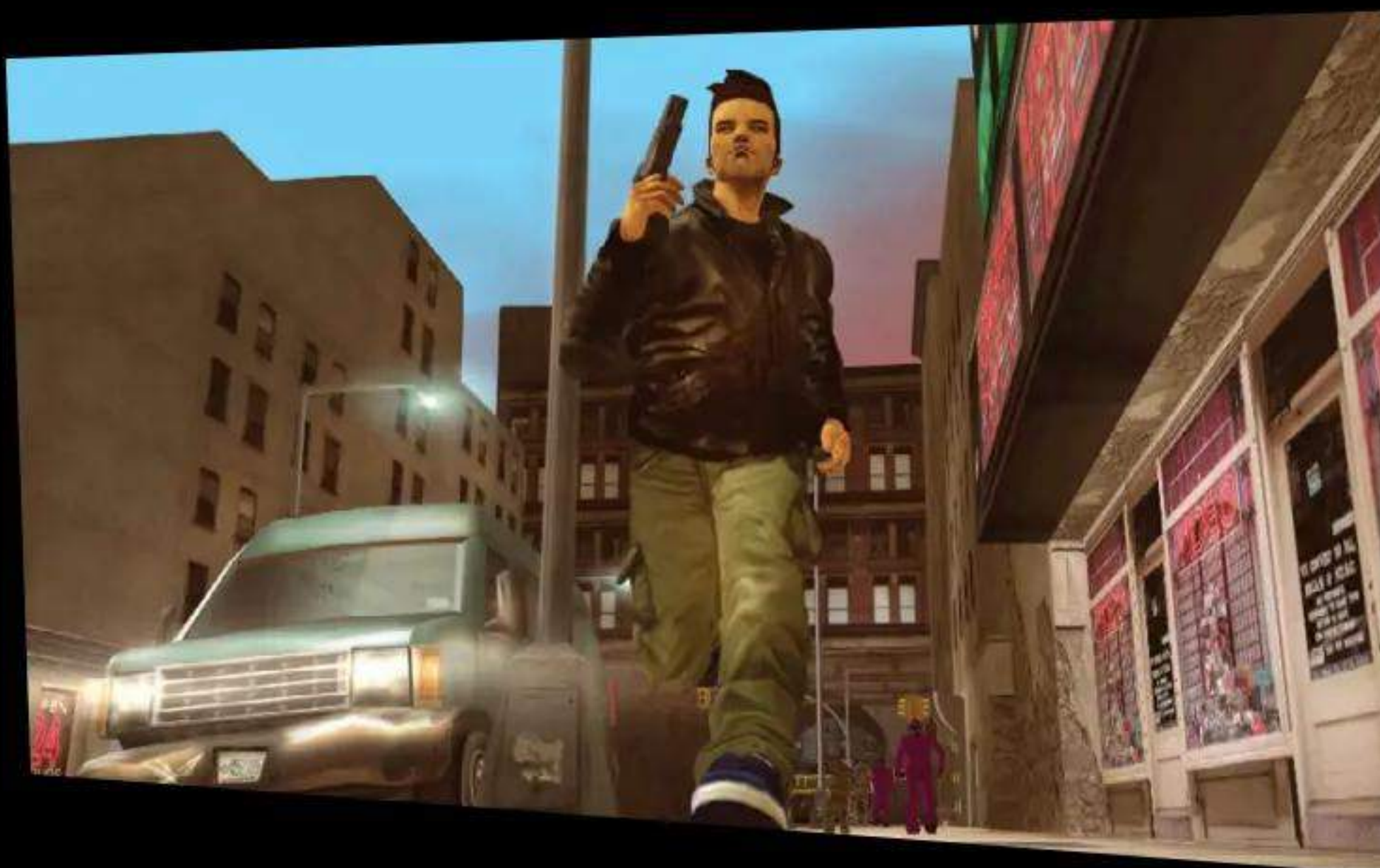
1999

Grand Theft Auto 2

Back to the future

Grand Theft Auto 2's futuristic setting makes the game a curious outlier in retrospect. But the choice of setting made more sense at the time. The series had just spawned two expansions set in the past, so why not place the sequel in the distant year of 2013?

Set in the imaginatively named Anywhere City, *GTA 2* is a fascinating artefact, straddling the line between DMA's original concept and how the series would be envisioned by the Housers. While it uses the same ramshackle engine of the first game, new elements like comedic radio stations and a live-action intro exhibit a flashiness that would become central to later *Grand Theft Auto* games. The sequel also features a fascinating Respect system that divides the city into different factions, with the player's actions in the world affecting their reputation with those organisations.



2001

Grand Theft Auto III

Hitting the big time

It had always been DMA's ideal to make *Grand Theft Auto* a fully 3D game. But back in 1995, the technical demands had been too prohibitive to render a 3D city of any meaningful size. With the sequel, the studio had experimented with full 3D prototypes, but had ultimately chosen to stick with the top-down perspective. With the advent of the PlayStation 2, however, Rockstar and DMA felt the hardware was now capable of meeting their ambitions.

The goal of *GTA III* was simply to convert the freeform anarchy of previous games into 3D. This was exciting enough in and of itself. But the third game still finds space to add several new features, like bespoke minigames for taxis and police cars, drivable boats and even an (extremely hard to control) plane. But beyond the move to 3D, the most

significant additions *GTA III* makes are tonal rather than mechanical. It's here that the series begins to develop its cinematic aspirations, introducing a more involved story inspired by gangster fiction like Scorsese movies and *The Sopranos*, told through mo-capped animated cutscenes.

It's also here where the acerbic social satire is brought to the fore of the series, most notably in ChatterboxFM's hour-long loop of radio chat show, hosted by real-life radio talk-show host Lazlow Jones. Cowritten by Jones and Dan Houser, ChatterboxFM took roughly five months to create, and would come to be one of the most fondly remembered aspects of the third game.

GTA III would go on to be a huge success, selling 14.5 million copies. And this time, the critical reception backed those sales up, with the game receiving glowing reviews. The series may have been around for several years at this point, but *GTA* as we know it today was born here.



2002

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

A Ray of sunshine

Although *GTA III* was a huge leap forward for the series, there were still areas where the newly renamed Rockstar North could clearly improve. While technically impressive, Liberty City lacked definition as an urban space, having only been based on New York midway through development. Silent protagonist Claude wasn't much of a character either, an empty vessel with no personality.

These were the issues Rockstar sought to address with *Vice City*, and it did so in spectacular fashion. *Vice City* swapped the grey skyscrapers of Liberty City for the sun-soaked beaches and neon-lit nightclubs of an alt-history 1980s Miami. Meanwhile, the voiceless Claude was replaced by Tommy Vercetti, a wisecracking mobster sporting a Hawaiian shirt and a vocal performance by none other than Ray Liotta. Combined with improved storytelling, mission design and possibly the best selection of music in the whole series, *Vice City* remains one of Rockstar's finest hours.

**CLAUDE WAS REPLACED BY
TOMMY VERCETTI, A
WISECRACKING MOBSTER**



GTA got better looking, but was it ever really this stylish again?

2004

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

A new State of affairs

Grand Theft Auto had always aspired to create, in the words of former Rockstar North president Leslie Benzies, a “living, breathing 3D world”. *San Andreas* was the first entry to commit to the ‘living’ part. Expanding the scope to an entire fictional US state rather than a single city, *San Andreas* casts players as CJ Johnson, who becomes embroiled in the state’s gang life following the murder of his mother.

Alongside its massive map, what separates *San Andreas* from previous *GTAs* are its in-depth role-playing systems, letting you go to the gym, eat in restaurants, play basketball and pool, mod cars and rob houses at night. *GTA 2*’s Respect system returns to govern character relationships with CJ, while you can also take over sections of the city through its Gang Wars system. *San Andreas* was by far the most mechanically ambitious *GTA* had ever been, and in terms of letting you live a specific life, Rockstar arguably hasn’t bettered it.



San Andreas took players to three cities rather than one.



**NIKO BELLIC, THE CLOSEST
GTA HAS COME TO A TRULY
EMPATHETIC ANTI-HERO**

THE HISTORY OF Grand theft auto



2008

Grand Theft Auto IV

GTA gets real

After *San Andreas*, Rockstar struggled to find a way forward with *Grand Theft Auto*, with Sam Houser calling *San Andreas* a “nightmare” to follow up. But with HD-era consoles bringing a huge leap in visual fidelity, Rockstar eventually settled on realism as the defining characteristic of *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

The setting would once again be Liberty City, yet unlike *GTA III*, it wouldn't be a generic American metropolis vaguely themed after New York. It would be an exhaustive pastiche, built from thousands of photos and hours of footage of the city where Rockstar was based. This would be built in a new graphics engine, RAGE, complemented by a revolutionary new physics system that not only gave cars realistic weight and inertia, but also powered how the player walked and ran around the city, and how NPCs

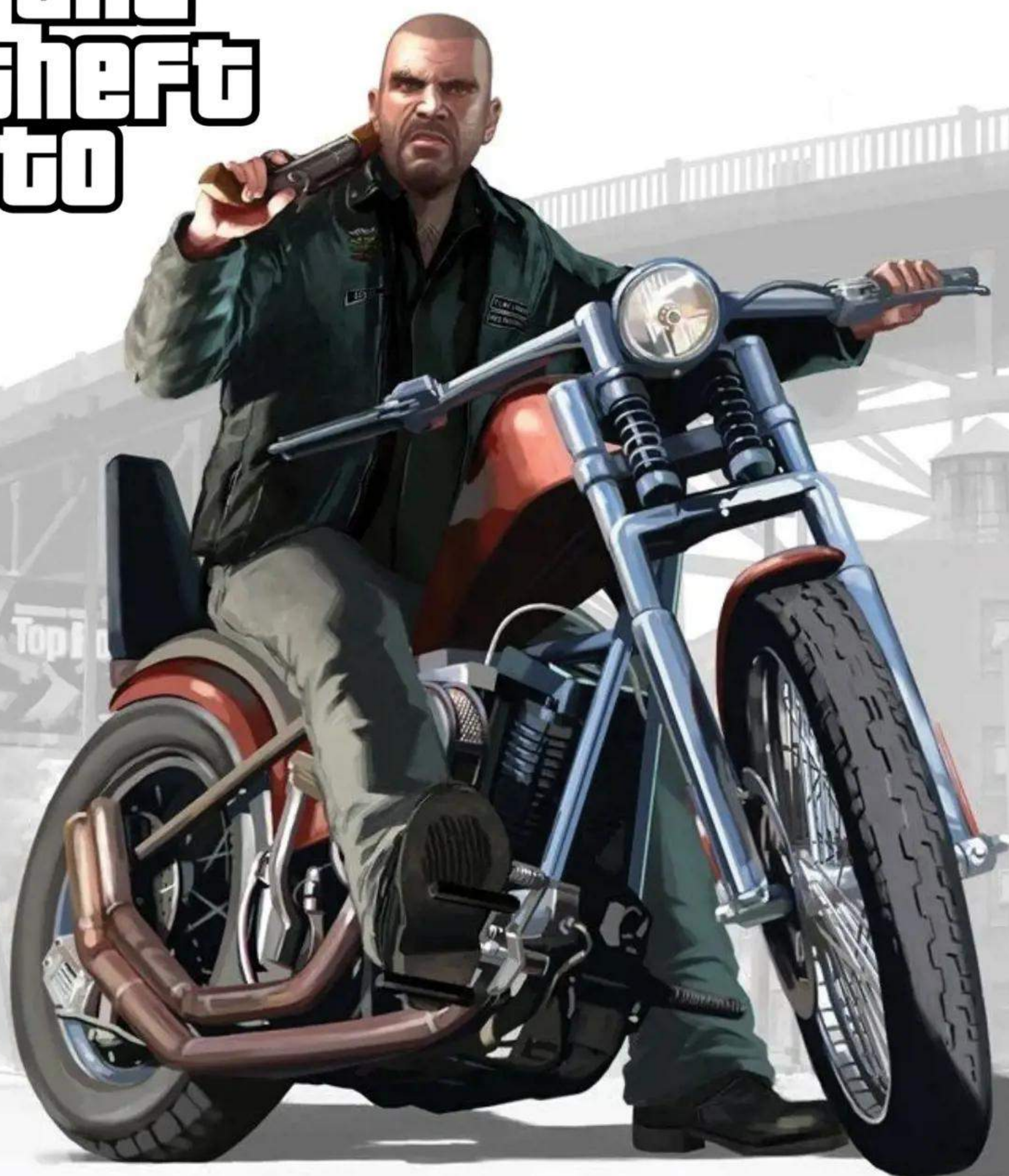
staggered and crumpled when shot. Rockstar also overhauled the combat system, previously a weak point, bringing it in line with modern cover-shooters like *Gears of War*.

Most dramatically of all, Rockstar eschewed the cinematic parodies of previous games, instead attempting a more serious, bespoke story about an eastern-European immigrant struggling to escape his violent past and striving to realise the American Dream. The result was Niko Bellic, the closest *GTA* has come to a truly empathetic anti-hero.

There were trade-offs for Rockstar's fixation on realism. The world was slightly smaller than that of *San Andreas*, and Rockstar also dropped the innovative roleplaying systems. Nonetheless, the unprecedented attention to detail in *GTA IV* not only resulted in huge commercial success and near universal critical acclaim, it also transformed *Grand Theft Auto* from one of the biggest names in gaming into a global cultural phenomenon.



THE HISTORY OF Grand theft auto



2009

GTA IV: The Lost and Damned

Guns of Anarchy

Rockstar followed *GTA IV* with the series' first expansion in a decade. Yet unlike the *GTA: London* add-ons, which switched up the base game's location and historical period, *The Lost and Damned* was set in the same Liberty City as *GTA IV*, but introduced a new story and playable character – Johnny Klebitz, vice president of The Lost motorcycle club.

The Lost and Damned introduced several new features to the experience, such as mid-mission checkpoints, new minigames like arm wrestling and air hockey, NPC bikers who could accompany Johnny on missions, and a Gang Wars system partly inspired by *San Andreas*. The real draw, though, was its fantastic, *Sons of Anarchy*-inspired story, which saw Johnny juggling conflicts with other motorcycle gangs, political tensions in his own club, and the attention of the police and the New York mafia.



The mission to bomb the Rockefeller Christmas Tree was an unusual segue.

2009

GTA IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony

With friends like these...

Six months after *The Lost and Damned*, Rockstar released a second expansion for *GTA IV*. Swapping the player's perspective once more, *The Ballad of Gay Tony* revolved around Luis Fernando-Lopez, a former drug dealer who becomes the bodyguard and best friend of nightclub owner 'Gay' Tony Prince.

Like *The Lost and Damned*, *The Ballad of Gay Tony* adds numerous new features, swapping the former's Gang Wars system for the similarly

structured Drug Wars, and introducing player scores for individual missions. As with that first expansion, however, the main draw was the story, which featured some of the most outrageous *GTA* characters to date, alongside the usual serving of gang conflicts and snowballing chaos. Together, the two expansions arguably represent the series' narrative high-point, taking the lessons learned writing *GTA IV* and creating even sharper stories with a more interesting mix of characters.





2013

Grand Theft Auto V

A living, breathing world

Where *Grand Theft Auto IV* had brought a technical overhaul to the series, *Grand Theft Auto V* sought to expand upon that foundation. Hence, as *IV* had looked to Liberty City for inspiration, *V* looked to San Andreas. Not only did *V* borrow a chunk of *San Andreas*' map to form its setting, it also picked up an idea discarded by Rockstar during that game's development – the ability to switch between three different playable characters.

On the subject of character, *Grand Theft Auto V* returned to the sillier tone and cinema-inspired plot of the early 3D games. Its tale of retired bank robbers returning to their dubious trade drew heavily from classic heist movies, particularly Michael Mann's *Heat*. The writing is more comic and absurdist, with larger-than-life characters and missions that more frequently throw players into ridiculous situations.

This came at the cost of some narrative depth. The game's three protagonists are harder to like than *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s Niko. Moreover, while the campaign features some fantastic missions, especially its signature heists, many of its smaller missions are intensely railroaded, giving the player little room to express themselves.

Outside of missions, however, *GTA V* offers one of the most remarkable sandboxes ever constructed. Los Santos and its surrounding county is a triumph of environment design, from the golden shores of Vespucci beach to the forested wilderness surrounding Mount Chiliad. Moreover, *GTA V*'s simulation of a modern society in motion is second to none. The way pedestrians react when you bump into them, the overheard phone calls and conversations, the way the world so naturally moulds itself around your input. A decade on from release, simply wandering around Los Santos remains a mesmerising experience.



THE HISTORY OF Grand theft auto



INSPIRED BY THE
REAL-LIFE ESCAPADES
OF BONNIE & CLYDE

2013

Grand Theft Auto Online

Hey buddy, wanna buy some multiplayer?

Grand Theft Auto's multiplayer history is sporadic to say the least. The original game and *San Andreas* had limited multiplayer modes, but the majority were purely singleplayer. It isn't until *Grand Theft Auto IV* that the series gets proper multiplayer functionality, which allowed up to 32 players to fight, race and cause general chaos across Liberty City.

GTA Online swings the other way, as if Rockstar was trying to make up for those lost multiplayer years all at once. Essentially a separate game that uses *GTA V*'s map, *GTA Online* allowed players to create their own criminal miscreant and attempt to make it big in a world crawling with other players. Straddling the line between standard multiplayer experience and MMO, it let players fight each other or work together in the world itself, while also partaking in more specific activities like racing, deathmatches and more bespoke Contract Missions.

Initially hindered by server issues and a repetitive grind, *GTA Online* found its feet over time. The game adapted easily to emerging live-service models, truly coming into its own with the Heists update in 2015. This introduced five large-scale cooperative missions to the game similar to the singleplayer's signature set pieces. Since then, more Heists have been added, alongside other new features like stunt races, nightclub businesses and, more controversially, the Diamond Casino.

Though flawed, *GTA Online* has been instrumental in maintaining the series' relevance during the long wait for a sequel to *GTA V*. It's also been enormously lucrative for Rockstar, having generated in the region of \$8 billion for the company since 2013. Consequently, it's hard to imagine that a follow-up of some sorts isn't in the works alongside the upcoming, singleplayer sequel.



2025

Grand Theft Auto VI

Back in the game

R

ockstar's reveal of *Grand Theft Auto VI* got off to a bumpy start. Not only was

in-development footage of the game leaked online last year, but the trailer itself spilled onto the internet slightly before the planned reveal. Nonetheless, the upshot is the same. *Grand Theft Auto VI* is coming in 2025, and Rockstar has provided the first details of what players can expect from the sequel.

Grand Theft Auto VI is set in the fictional US State of Leonida – *GTA*'s fictional equivalent of Florida. Players will be returning to Vice City, which, as you'd expect from the studio that most recently released *Red Dead Redemption 2*, looks eye-poppingly realistic. The trailer shows a Miami-like beach thronged with a diverse range of NPCs, glittering downtown areas with towering skyscrapers and lavish resort districts lined with expensive cars. But as with *Grand Theft Auto V*, it appears the action won't be limited to Vice City itself. The trailer shows numerous rural locations, such as a highway strung across an archipelago of islands, and an airboat barrelling through Everglade-like marshlands.

The story, meanwhile, centres around two protagonists, Lucia, the series' first female lead in over two decades, and a second, male character whose name is not yet confirmed. In 2022, a report by Bloomberg claimed the game's plot will be inspired by the real-life escapades of Bonnie & Clyde, and the reveal trailer supports that claim. It includes a scene of Lucia and her partner holding up a convenience

store, while another scene shows Lucia sat on her partner's lap on a bed, uttering the phrase, "The only way we're gonna get through this is by sticking together."

WAFFLE HOUSE

At present, there's no information on how *VI* will play. We can safely assume that mechanics will involve a mixture of driving, shooting and open-world shenanigans. But specific mechanics and new features are still under wraps. Footage that leaked prior to the game's reveal showed Lucia and her partner holding up a waffle house. But there's no guarantee this location or mechanic will feature in the final game.

That said, the trailer does provide some sense of the sequel's tone. Lucia and her partner seem more grounded as characters than *GTA V*'s Michael and Trevor. Then again, the trailer is also full of social media clips of weird events, like an elderly lady wielding two hammers in the street. But these clips are based on real videos of events that occurred in Florida, suggesting that Rockstar isn't going to have to stretch to fill its game with weird stuff while also telling a story with rounded, believable characters.

Two other points worth noting. This is the first *GTA* in over 20 years to launch without Dan Houser and Leslie Benzies on the team (Sam Houser remains president of Rockstar). It'll be interesting to see how that affects the general direction of the game, although Dan Houser only left Rockstar fairly recently, so his DNA may still be present in the game.

Finally, Rockstar is yet to directly confirm the game is coming to PC. For the moment, only PS5 and Xbox One have been announced as platforms. But this has been the case with *Grand Theft Auto* since 2001, and all the games have found their way to PC eventually. *Grand Theft Auto VI* will be no different. We'll just have to be a little extra patient.



a CRACK *in the* SLAB

Revisiting A Crack in the Slab, the most revered level of **DISHONORED 2**, with key insight from one of its expert designers, Arkane Studio's **THOMAS BOUCHER**

By Robert Jones



DISHONORED 2

TOUR DE FORCE

Journey into A Crack in the Slab



Whenever the immersive sim genre is brought up as a topic of conversation, the usual suspects are always in attendance, and rightly so. From *System Shock* to *Deus Ex*, *Bioshock* to *Prey*, these games and series remain to this day huge pillars in the PC gaming landscape. However, for my money, while I feel these games and series deserve their legendary reputations, one series towers above them all within the immersive sim genre: Arkane Studio's superlative *Dishonored*.

Hitting store shelves back in 2012, the first-person immersive sim *Dishonored* placed you in the shoes of Corvo Attano, the Royal Protector to the realm's Empress Jessamine Kaldwin. However, after being framed for her murder and, in true The Count of Monte Cristo style, wrongfully imprisoned, as the player you're then given the job of clearing your name, saving Jessamine's daughter, and seeking vengeance upon those who wronged you. The truly magical part of this gaming experience, though, is

NEED TO KNOW



WHAT IS IT?

One of the very finest immersive sims ever made, a game so good it lodged a score of 93% in PC Gamer magazine.

RELEASE

November 10, 2016

DEVELOPER

Arkane Lyon

PUBLISHER

Bethesda Softworks

LINK

shorturl.at/qGJDB

that how you do that is left completely up to you. Arkane gave the player so many tools, weapons, powers and possibilities to complete the game's missions that the phrase 'play it your way' had never been more true. The immersive sim had been taken to a wondrous new level.

It was in *Dishonored*'s sequel, though, 2016's *Dishonored 2*, where Arkane truly hit immersive sim Nirvana. Bigger and grander than *Dishonored*, the sequel sees you, playing as either original protagonist Corvo, or daughter of the departed Jessamine, Emily Kaldwin, seeking to reclaim the throne for the royal family after it is taken over by Delilah Copperspoon, a dark figure from Jessamine's past who has returned for a spot of revenge. The craft on show in *Dishonored 2* is testament to why many PC gamers like me think so highly of Arkane. The choice and freedom is incredible, but there's so much flair, passion and creativity laced throughout this game I simply never get tired of inhabiting its world.

And the height of that immersive sim heaven in *Dishonored 2* is its level A Crack in the Slab, a jaw-dropping piece of game design that takes everything you thought you knew



AS YOU SNAP BETWEEN A CRACK IN THE SLAB'S MULTIPLE WORLDS, ITS BREATHTAKING SCOPE COMES TO THE FORE

about *Dishonored* and then shifts it up a level, for while A Crack in the Slab removes play options that you have access to in its other levels, it grants a hell of a magical new one: the ability to travel through time. The immersive sim has never been the same since.

MANY WORLDS IN ONE

Set in the huge manor of Aramis Stilton, a key figure in *Dishonored 2*'s dark story, A Crack in the Slab sees you enter it in one time, only to be granted a terrifyingly powerful tool from beyond the Void by the mysterious Outsider, a timepiece that not only lets you travel between the present and the past, but actually see through it at any moment into the other time. Holding the timepiece up, you can peer through it into the other time, which continues to exist parallel to yours.

In the present you exist in, Aramis' manor is ruined and – aside from the owner himself, who has gone mad and can be found rattling around in its once grand music room – is inhabited by nothing other than rats, bloodflies and Weepers, former humans who have succumbed to the worst ravages of the Rat Plague. To defeat Delilah, you need to find out what happened





here many years ago, and the timepiece is your way to do that.

From a gameplay perspective, though, the timepiece is truly remarkable, allowing Arkane to build puzzles, combat, secrets and narrative storytelling into the level via the medium of timepiece usage. It forces you, as the player, to start thinking in terms of not just what you can see, but beyond that with another dimension. Can't get through to a room in the past due to an obstacle? Well, maybe

that obstacle doesn't exist in the present? Have no way of getting to a location in the present? Well, maybe you can manipulate something in the past to change things in the present. When you first experience this, it is truly mindblowing.

Examples like that just scratch the surface of the myriad possibilities within *A Crack in the Slab*, though. Depending on multiple decisions the player makes within the level, the end state of it, as well as the destiny of

ABOVE: *Dishonored 2*'s gorgeous art style just drips with detail and quality, bringing levels like *A Crack in the Slab* to life wonderfully.

BELOW: Corvo, the original *Dishonored* protagonist, is joined in the sequel by Emily as a playable character.

characters and locations outside of it back in the present, can be affected. It truly is cause and effect. The player makes a decision in the past, and in the present that decision can have big consequences, including coming back to a very different manor and surrounding district from the one you originally left from.

As you snap between *A Crack in the Slab*'s worlds, utilising the timepiece to explore the manor's past and presents, exploring its lavishly decorated or dilapidated interior rooms, discovering its secrets, peering in on scenes from another time like a spectre at the feast, and potentially outwitting its enemies with temporal trickery, the breathtaking scope of this level comes to the fore. Yes, time travel in videogames had been done before *A Crack in the Slab*, but never had it been done like this.

Arkane achieved something truly remarkable with this freewheelingly creative, showpiece level in *Dishonored 2*. A virtual world that is as complex as it is beautiful, as narratively rich as it is mind-bending, and one that is filled with a truly astonishing amount of player choice, the backbone of the immersive sim gaming experience. Chapeau! ■

TIME LORD

The magic of *A Crack in the Slab*'s timepiece



1 Transition

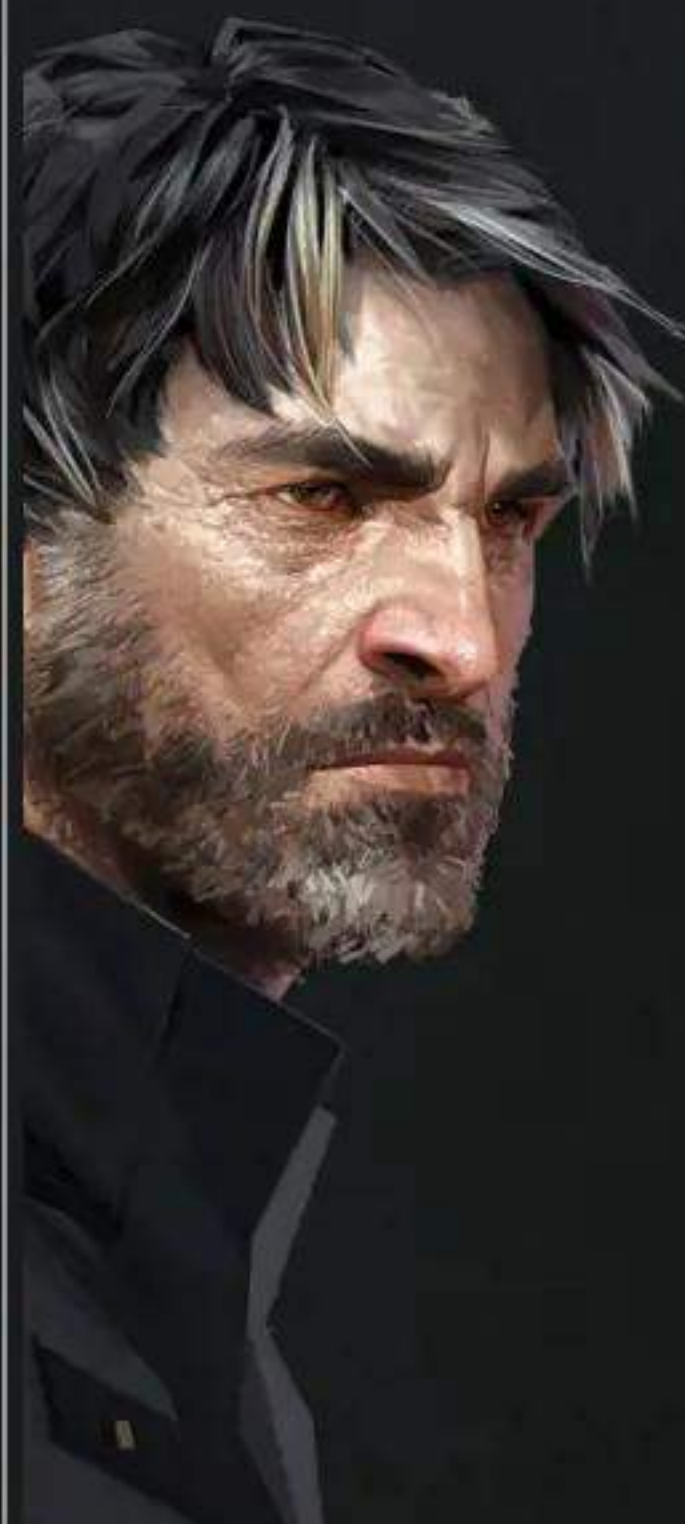
The timepiece grants the player the ability to fully transition between different times.

2 Snapshot

These blades allow the player to view the alternate time from the one they're in easily.

3 Reality

While outside the blades, current reality is shown, allowing tactical play opportunities.



A Crack in the Slab

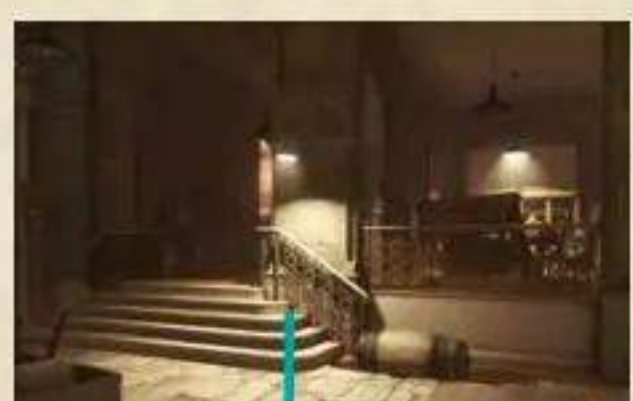
Submerged Area

There are submerged secrets to be found down here via clever use of the timepiece.



Basement

One of the manor's least visited rooms. Watch out for the barrels of fine wine.



Lower Study

The location of the dark seance that drives Stilton mad. Where Delilah returns.



Central Hall

This large hall is stuffed with guards, as well as the main stairs to the first floor.



Lower Door to Courtyard

The lower entrance to the rear courtyard. Behind the pool.



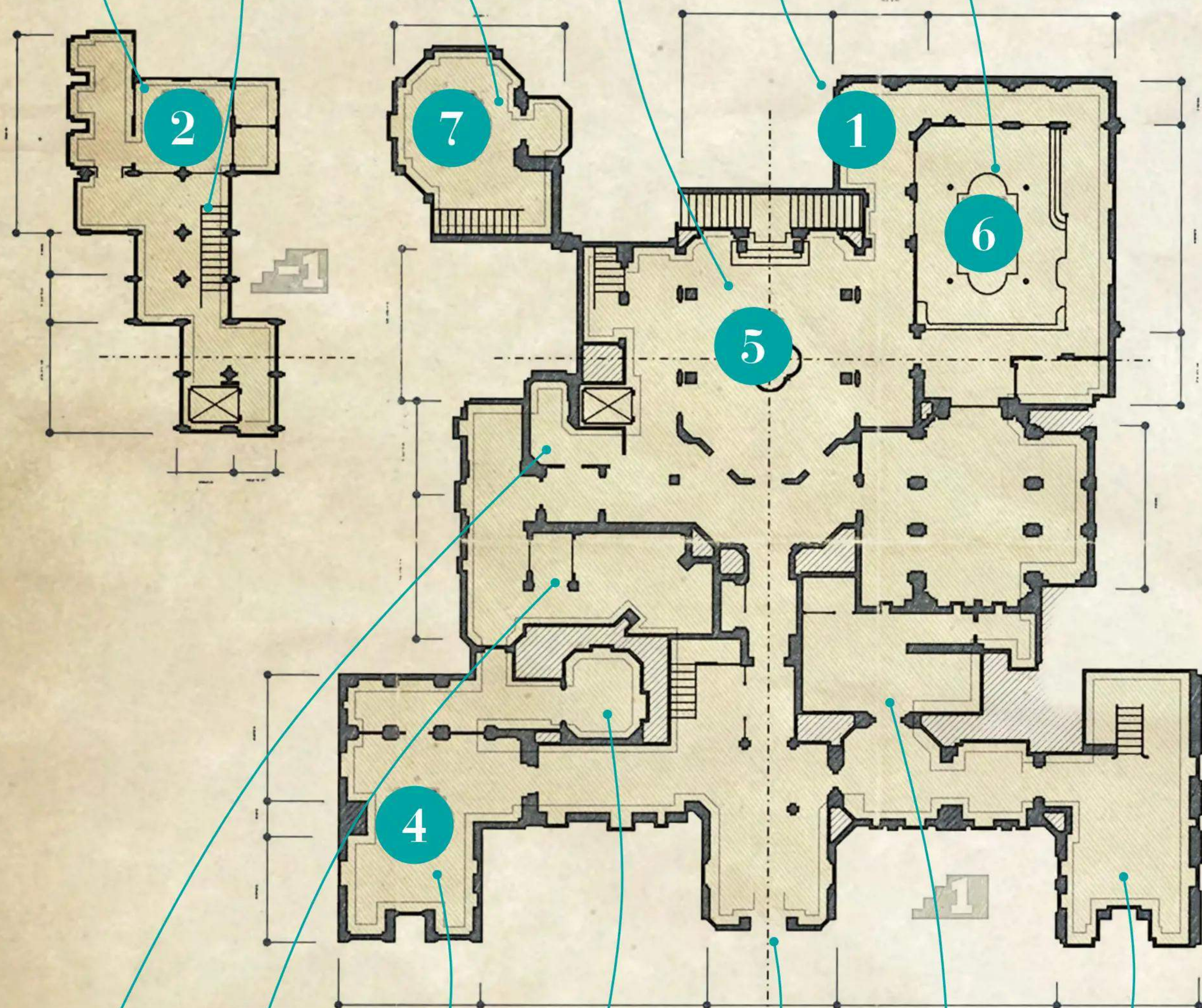
Pool

A stunning indoor swimming pool in the past, but dank, dirty hole in the present.



Upper Study

Aramis Stilton's study is entered from this floor. It leads to the seance location.



Boiler Room

Manipulating time here allows you to grab some goodies, and change the present.



Work Room

A largely inconsequential room, but one that is detailed and nicely appointed.



Dining Hall

There are time puzzles a plenty here, as well as plenty of guards while in the past.



Vault

An obstacle that needs to be bypassed by transitioning between the two time periods.



Front Door

Where you originally enter Aramis Stilton's manor. Opens into a large lobby area.



Kitchen

This impressively large room is stuffed with food and, in the past, two cooks.



Music Room

A grand room with even grander grand piano. Where you first find mad Aramis.

FLOORPLANS

MANIAC MANSION

Inside insane Aramis Stilton's massive manor

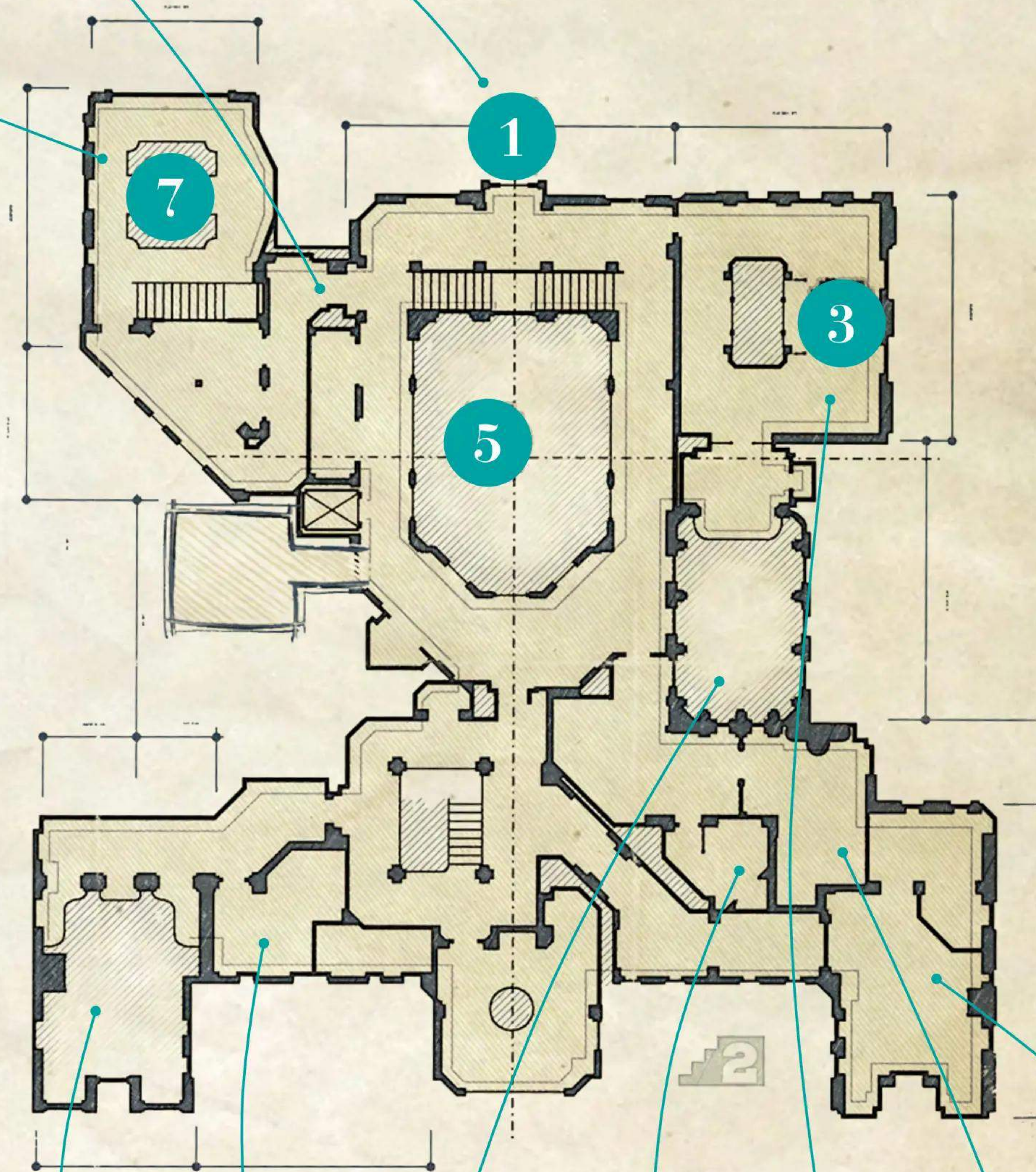
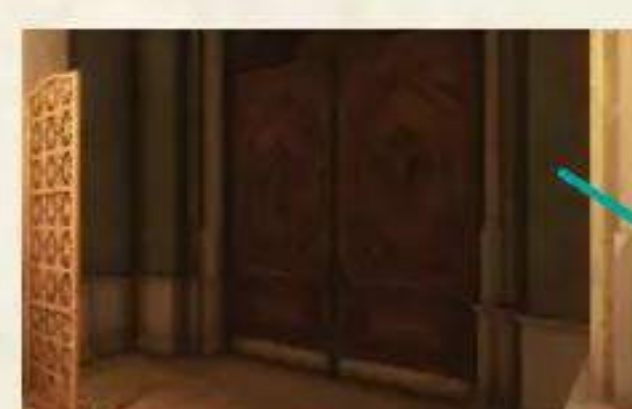
Locked Door

This door, leading to Stilton's study, is locked with a numerical key code.



Upper Door to Courtyard

The upper entrance to the rear courtyard. Tougher to get to.



- 1 BACK COURTYARD
- 2 BASEMENT
- 3 BUTTERFLY ROOM
- 4 DINING ROOM
- 5 GREAT HALL
- 6 POOL
- 7 THE STUDY



Attic

Can be accessed, but only with clever play using the Timepiece and chandeliers.



Guest Room

This large guest room features a luxurious bathroom as well as a harp and sofa.



Open Courtyard

A small flower-filled courtyard with balcony. Messing with the balcony pays off.



Bathroom

Featuring a large, ornate bath, this room offers up a few trinkets.



Gallery

A beautiful room adorned with a butterfly collection and pieces of art.



Storage

A busy room filled with guards, curiosities, art and collectibles. Check out Stilton's bust.



Master Bedroom

A treasure trove of finds. Aramis Stilton slept well. Be sure to play the audiograph.

DEVELOPER DIARY

DESIGN MASTER

Speaking with A Crack in the Slab's expert designer, Thomas Boucher



Constructing such a showpiece level must have been no easy feat, with so much player choice possible and so many variables in play. To get an insight into its concept and creation, PC Gamer spoke directly with its expert designer, Thomas Boucher.

What was the initial conception for A Crack in the Slab?

In *BioShock 2* there is one level where you can travel between the past and the present. For A Crack in the Slab, we wanted to push that idea a bit more, use it as a gameplay tool this time. We asked ourselves, what can we offer players with this mechanic that other games have never tried to?

Mechanically, how is the level constructed?

It is a little trick. Which is to basically build multiple maps within a level. One map for the present, and one map for the past, for example, with us then teleporting the player from one to the other. For A Crack in the Slab, this is actually what we did. We built several maps, and we just teleported the player between each of them.

Could you always see through time with the timepiece?

I think as long as I remember, it was always part of the mission. It was really important to give this feature to the players. If we hadn't done that, basically I think it was saying to the players, "OK, I know you have this really cool timepiece to travel between time, but you are basically blind and good luck finishing the game in ghost mode".

How did you create the level's time-based puzzles?

For me, one thing that was important for me, was to use the time-travel mechanic as much as possible, using the time-travel concept. Which is changing something in the past, and then we have a consequence during

DEV PROFILE



Thomas Boucher

TITLE
Designer

YEARS AT STUDIO
Ten

FAVOURITE GAMES
Deus Ex, The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind, Perfect Dark, Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, Shenmue 2

EDUCATION
Professional degree: Game and Level Design IUT de Bobigny Université Paris 13

the present. We had to find ideas around that. And I knew, for me, it would be two things. It would be interactivity and mobility. We had to 'tutorialise' it at the very beginning of the mission; when you're given the timepiece, just after you are stuck in the piano room, it appears that in the past the door to exit the room is closed. Then we are teaching the player, "Now I have this timepiece. What can I do with it?" Basically, you need to find the right location in the past, and switch into the present, and then you can progress in the present where the doors are now open.

How did you approach storytelling in such a complex level?

It was a bit tough. We had the past and present, and I think that in each one of them we're telling a story at a different point of time. The tough thing here was that both are linked, in a sense, and they were communicating with each other, due to the fact that you could change stuff by travelling through time. So, while exploring the mansion during the past, the player can progressively see and understand the key events that lead not only to the fall of Stilton, but also who he really was and why he was a bit different from Delilah's other followers. And the climax of all of that is, if you remember, the ritual to bring back Delilah.

That bit in the ritual where Delilah calls you out, saying, "I can't see you, but I know you're there, and I'm going to get you," is so spooky, cool, and memorable.

Yeah. That line is very cool. You think you're invisible, but not to her, because she's very powerful and omniscient.

Why did you strip the player of their powers in this level?

Removing the main powers from the

player was a decision that I think, in the end, needed to be this way. And why? Because I think it would have impacted the fun of using the timepiece itself. As an example, you have this puzzle where you can break a balcony in the past, and use it as a climbing platform in the present to progress. So that's an example where you can work with the timepiece. But if you had your power of Blink, you would just have to Blink in the present and you could reach the above platform regardless of the timepiece.

Did you ever conceive cascading the consequences of this level into the wider game?

We thought about that. There are some details when you come back in the district that change depending on what you did in the mansion. It's a small detail, but, yes, we thought about it. But I think we quickly decided that it would ask too much of us, and the rest of the team, to implement more changes and more consequences depending on the action of the player during that mission.

Did you learn anything in terms of your professional craft from working on A Crack in the Slab?

Yes. When crafting this level, I think I understood that there were so many ways to do the level design, because I had to use almost the same architecture to craft the different variations of the mission in it. So I think it pushed me to think this way, like, "I can use the same room and same geometry, and propose something really different to players in terms of circulation and mobility and narrative events and also the mission design."

Finally, what is your favourite part of A Crack in the Slab?

I think the thing that I am the proudest of, is the fact that we built an alternative version of the present time – you know, when you save Stilton; when you come back into the present, everything has changed. The mansion is pristine again. Basically, we showed to the player that the action had a true impact on the present. It changed the course of history of the manor itself. It was really cool to show that to players. ■



A Crack in the Slab



1 Concept art for Corvo, showing the famous *Dishonored* mask, as well as his gun and crossbow.

2 Art for just a few of *Dishonored 2*'s many, many items. The detail imbued into them is truly fantastic.

3 A panorama of Karnaca, the main setting for the game. It is the capital city of Serkonos.

4 An illustrated storyboard of a Void power being used with an extended kill animation.

5 Concept art for but a few of the characters the player can stumble across in *Dishonored 2*.

6 What's remarkable is these designs are ported into the game with great accuracy.



PLAYTHROUGH

TIME TRIAL

The gripping flow of A Crack in the Slab



2

Wrack and ruin

Entering the manor, the tension continues to build as you explore its ruinous lobby, stairwell, and nearby corridors. The building has been partially reclaimed by nature, while detritus is everywhere.



3

Discovering Aramis

Eventually, you discover Aramis Stilton in the Music Room. He's gone mad. At this point the mysterious Outsider appears and bestows upon you the Timepiece, which lets you travel between time periods.



4

Shifting sands

Progression through the manor requires the player to use the Timepiece, with obstacles removed by shifting between past and present. This introduces the idea of cause and effect, foreshadowing the level's end.



1

Manor approach

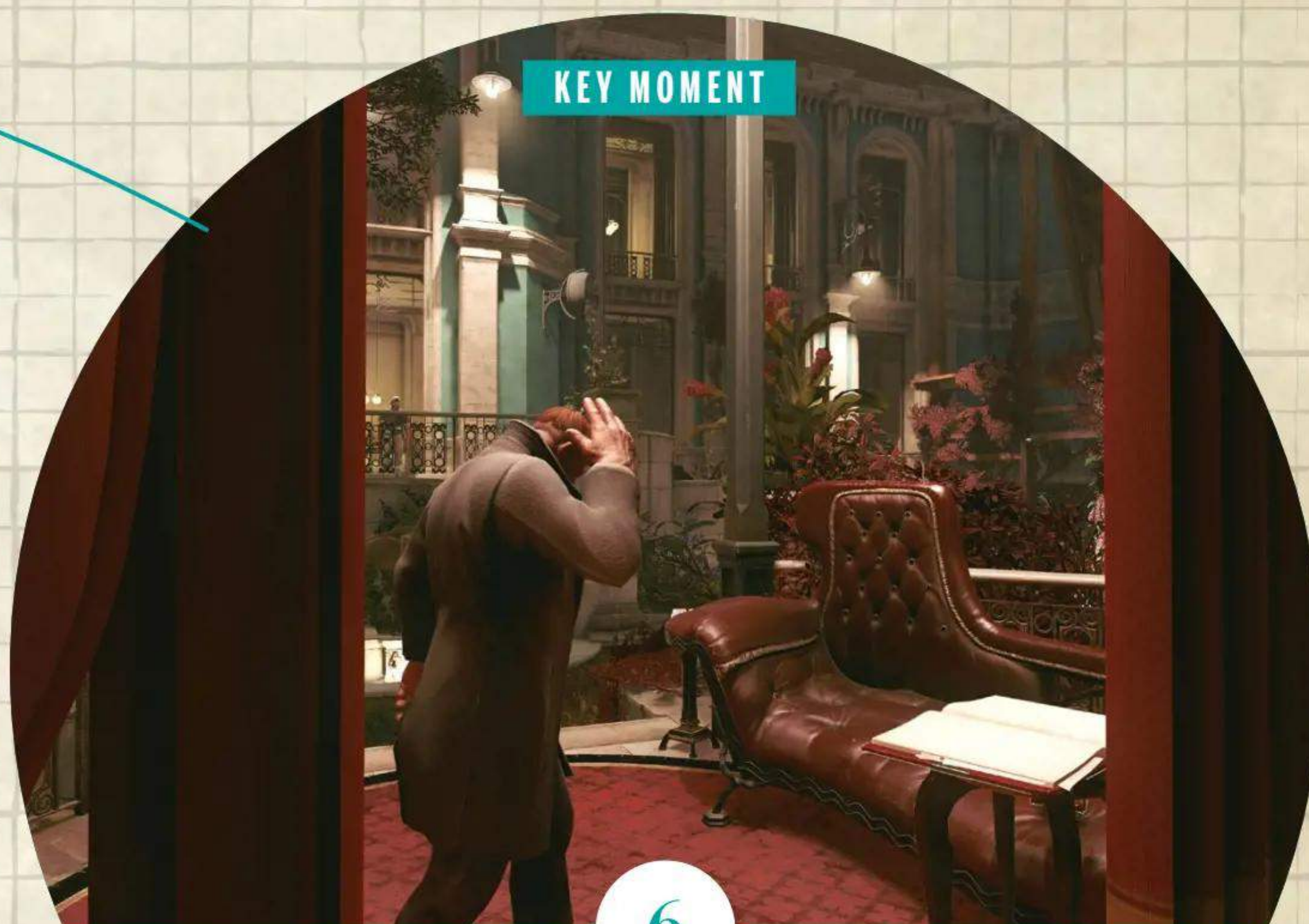
A Crack in the Slab opens in the front courtyard of Aramis Stilton's manor. The building is immediately imposing due to its sheer size and its state of advanced dilapidation, building tension straight away.

IMMERSIVE SIM MASTERCLASS

NEATLY, BIG
BAD DELILAH
COPPERSPOON
CALLS OUT TO YOU
CREEPILY FROM
ACROSS TIME



KEY MOMENT



6

Stilton effect

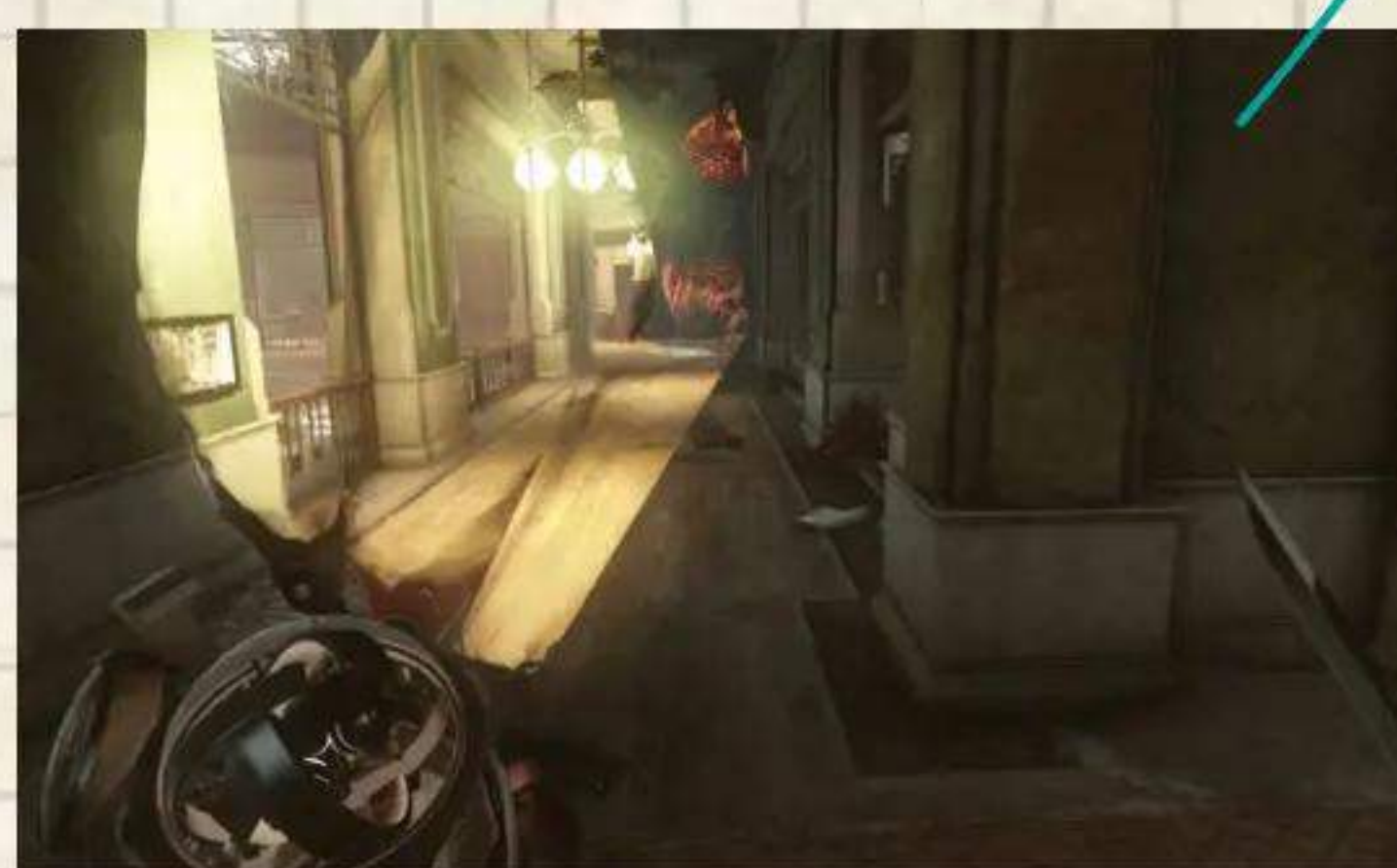
The key moment in *A Crack in the Slab* is how you deal with Aramis Stilton when you find him in the past. Multiple options are available here, including leaving him alone, killing him or knocking him out, and each will heavily dictate what end state the manor is in when returning to the present.



5

Under the table

Acquiring the manor's master key without alerting guards is a good example of a time-based puzzle. By hiding under a table in the present, the player can transition to the past and grab it unseen, then return.



7

Entering the study

Regardless of how Aramis is dealt with, entering the manor's locked study is key to finishing the level. This can be done in multiple ways, from finding its door code, to making good use of the Timepiece.



8

Secret seance

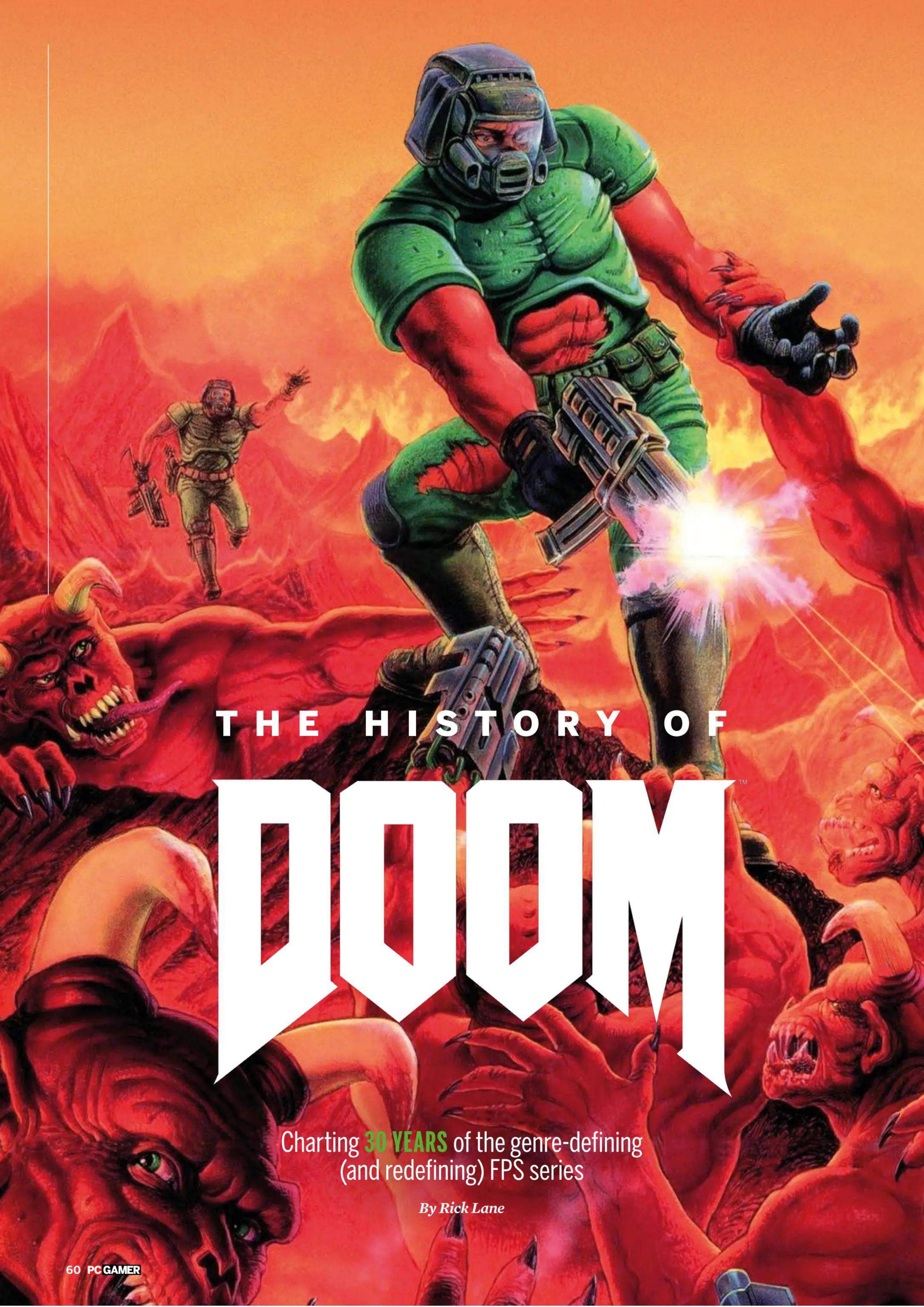
When you enter the study, the level reaches a dramatic crescendo, as you witness the seance that originally drove Stilton to go insane. Neatly, big bad Delilah calls out to you creepily from across time.



9

Exfiltration

Finally, *A Crack in the Slab* concludes with you returning to the present to see the consequences of your actions, with the world either changed (in potentially multiple ways), or not changed, depending on what you did.



THE HISTORY OF

DOOM™

Charting **30 YEARS** of the genre-defining
(and redefining) FPS series

By Rick Lane

The History of Doom

The history of *Doom* is more than just the tale of how John Romero and John Carmack came together to create a PC gaming phenomenon. The history of *Doom* is the history of id Software and the history of the FPS itself. From the 1993 original to 2020's *Doom Eternal*, each new *Doom* game developed by id Software has both reflected the culture of the studio at the time, and moved the needle of the FPS in some manner.



Doom

RELEASED 1993 DEVELOPER id Software

The development of 1993's *Doom* is one of the most well-documented projects in the medium's history. After John Carmack discovered a way to mimic the side-scrolling effect of *Super Mario Bros 3* on PC, Carmack worked with John Romero, alongside game designer Tom Hall, to create their own game, *Commander Keen in Invasion of the Vortigauns*.

After receiving their first royalty cheque from publisher Apogee, Romero and Carmack founded their own company with artist Adrian Carmack (no relation), while also hiring Hall. Through 1991 they made three more *Commander Keen* games, then released the first true FPS, *Wolfenstein 3D*, in 1992. After *Wolfenstein*'s success, id began making a follow-up shooter, this time inspired by a D&D campaign the four founders had played together at weekends. Nineteen months after *Wolfenstein*, a legend was born.

Doom's origin story may be familiar, but there's one element of it that remains puzzling. Why is it *Doom* that is so revered today, and not *Wolfenstein*? Id's first shooter was the real trailblazer, and a major hit in its own right. *Doom* really just iterated on those ideas, a fact acknowledged by the game's original reviews. PC Zone's review, for example, summarises *Doom*'s premise

as "very simple, very *Wolfenstein*". Why do we worship the second true FPS ever made, and not the first? Clues to the answer can be found in those same reviews. *Doom* may have been built upon the same principles as *Wolfenstein*, but everything about it was so much more vivid and elevated. "The speed and smoothness of this texture-mapping system make *Ultima Underworld*, *Shadowcaster*, *Terminator Rampage* and *Jurassic Park* look like they're running in BASIC," writes Zone's reviewer David McCandless. Even Edge's review of *Doom* states that *Wolfenstein*'s 3D levels look "primitive" compared to id's latest shooter. "There are stairs for you to climb, lifts to find and aliens firing at you from windows... go back and play *Wolfenstein* and you'll laugh at the 2Dness of the 3D perspective."

But perhaps the most significant difference between *Wolfenstein* and *Doom* had little to do with visuals. In January 1994, right after *Doom*'s launch, Game Developer magazine published an article called 'Monsters from the Id' that points out how *Doom*'s new engine allowed "all objects to have physical characteristics, such as weight, momentum and even sound. For example, bullets were actual physical projectiles in the *Doom* engine as opposed to *Wolfenstein*, where they were just calculations".

AGELESS DESIGN

With *Doom*, id realised that a shooter doesn't just have to look good, it has to feel good as well. Add to that a far more striking setting and multiplayer capabilities, and it's clear that *Wolfenstein* pales in comparison.

The History of Doom

» Yet this doesn't explain why the same thing didn't happen to *Doom* when, for example, *Quake* launched. By now, *Doom* has been surpassed technologically countless times over, yet its reputation remains intact. Some of the reasons for this are the same that made *Doom* such a phenomenon in the first place. Its infernal sci-fi aesthetic is more vivid and distinctive than many shooters that would come after it. The game's deviously intricate levels have also stood the test of time, thanks to the design talents of Romero and Sandy Petersen. As described in David Kushner's *Masters of Doom*, "Romero had a knack for staging the battles, letting the player win one round, then pummeling him with a storm of enemies." Petersen's levels, were "cerebral and strategic".

There are other reasons too, one of the main ones being its accessibility. *Doom* wasn't just visually cutting edge, it was hugely well optimised. As noted in *Monsters from the Id*, *Doom's* engine "has a

medium detail mode" that "triples the speed of the game on slower machines". This, combined with its initial shareware release, made *Doom* a hugely accessible game. That accessibility has only grown over time, to the point where *Doom* will run on everything.

There's one final reason why *Doom* remains such an enduring phenomenon, and it's hinted at in *Monsters from the Id*. *Wolfenstein's* launch saw an unexpected "cottage industry of hackers" who "hacked map editors, bitmap editors and sometimes entire modified games". Although *Wolfenstein's* publisher Apogee believed these "mutations" hurt sales, id felt "that people have the right to make whatever use of the game that makes them happy".

Id Software's attitude toward other designers' use of its tech, culminating in the release of the game's source code in 1997, would prove to be the most important decision in sealing the legacy of the original game. ■



Doom's weapons remain hugely satisfying to wield.

Doom II

RELEASED 1994 DEVELOPER id Software

On the face of it, *Doom II: Hell on Earth* is the least remarkable of the five mainline games. A straightforward follow-up built in the same engine, *Doom II* was designed to let id capitalise on the success of *Doom* while giving John Carmack the freedom to pursue new advances in graphics tech. In

FROM DOOM GUY TO DOOM SLAYER

How *Doom's* protagonist evolved into the ultimate killing machine



DOOM/DOOM II

The original *Doom* Guy is a ripped fellow wearing a green suit and a grey helmet. But players will be far more familiar with his many facial expressions, the alternating side glances, and the evil grin when he picks up a weapon.



DOOM 3

For *Doom 3*, id Software strove to humanise the *Doom* Guy, making his musculature less exaggerated, and occasionally allowing him to display glimpses of fear, such as when he encounters that game's towering CyberDemon.



DOOM (2016)

The 2016 reboot shifted its emphasis. Renaming him the *Doom* Slayer, it avoided showing his face and doubled-down on his aggressiveness, hinting that there might be something more than human about him.



DOOM ETERNAL

Where the reboot avoids giving the *Slayer* much backstory, *Eternal* emphasises it, characterising him as a general of the Night Sentinels. We also see his face, and hear him speak for the first time, even if it's only about four words.

**“ID HAS MANAGED TO IMPROVE
WHAT WAS ARGUABLY THE
most playable game ON THE PC”**

his autobiography, John Romero notes that, “During an early design meeting, we agreed that the formula for *Doom* was perfect and that the new game should just build on what we started without breaking the underlying game feel players loved.”

While primarily an expansive level pack using most of the same features

and assets, *Doom II* does add some features that would be important in the series’ history going forward. Most significant of these is the double-barrelled super shotgun, which according to Romero was added specifically because it could share the same number on the keyboard as the shotgun. “We didn’t want to tie a new weapon to 8, because the 7 key already controlled

our most brutal weapon, the BFG”. Although added out of convenience, the super shotgun quickly became one of the series’ most iconic weapons. Alongside this, *Doom II* also adds interesting new enemies like the Revenant and the Archvile, as well as the titanic Icon of Sin.

While offering nothing like the leap *Doom* has made over *Wolfenstein*, reviews of *Doom II* were nonetheless ecstatic. In PC Gamer’s review of *Doom II*, which awarded the game 95, Gary Whitta highlighted the more nuanced enhancements the game made over the original. “The puzzles are more complex, routes more maze-like and things like weapons and secret doors more difficult to find. Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of *Doom II*’s new design, however, is the overall mood and tone. It’s that much darker and more sinister.” Edge, which had awarded the original *Doom* a 7, gave the sequel a 9, stating: “Id has managed to improve what was arguably the most playable game on the PC.”

Doom II would be nothing without the foundations laid by the original. But there’s a case to be made that, today, the original *Doom* would be nothing without its sequel. Because of its slightly more advanced feature-set, the vast majority of *Doom* mods are actually built for *Doom II*, and the modding community has played an enormous role in keeping the original games alive while bigger, more refined shooters have grown around it. So while *Doom II* may be the least revolutionary of the mainline *Doom* games, it’s also, possibly, the most important to the series’ longevity. ■

Doom II placed more emphasis on moving elements.



Doom 3

RELEASED 2004 DEVELOPER id Software

By the time *Doom 3* entered development, id Software was a very different studio. The challenging development of *Quake* had seen the working relationship between Romero and Carmack break down, culminating in Romero's departure from the company just after *Quake's* launch. Romero would go on to found Ion Storm with Tom Hall, where they oversaw design of *Daikatana* and *Anachronox*.

Meanwhile, id Software knuckled down on two *Quake* sequels, the sci-fi, hardware accelerated *Quake II*, and the exclusively multiplayer *Quake III*. By 2003, id Software had grown to a core team of roughly 26 people. But the internal dynamic of the studio had also changed dramatically. While visiting the studio in 2003, prior to the publication of *Masters of Doom*, Kushner noted, "I've never seen id's office as focused as it is now."

While Carmack's influence is present in all id's early games, *Doom 3* is the one where his ideals shine through most clearly. It was Carmack who pushed to make a third *Doom* game after *Quake III*, when the original plan was to design a multiplayer RPG called *Quest*. This led to Carmack issuing an ultimatum to the main proponents for *Quest*, Adrian Carmack and Kevin Cloud, threatening that he would leave the company unless they made *Doom 3*. "Obviously no fun for anyone involved," Carmack later wrote in a .plan file (a prototypical hybrid between a blog post and social media), "but the project direction was changed, new hires have been expedited, and the design work has begun." There's no record of Cloud or the other Carmack's views on the topic from the time, but in a G4 documentary on the making of *Doom 3*, Cloud acknowledges his original position as "wrong" and that "[Carmack's] decision was great".

That same .plan file also outlines Carmack's reasoning for making *Doom 3*, namely "a general lack of excitement for the proposed plan, the warmth that [*Return to Castle*]

Wolfenstein was met with at E3, and excitement about what we can do with the latest rendering technology". This last point also hints at Carmack's influence on the project. Of all the *Doom* games, *Doom 3* is the one where the art and design revolves most heavily around the technology. Its unified lighting and shadowing system enabled most of the game's light sources to be computed in real-time. Combined with Carmack's homebrewed stencil-shadowing algorithm (known today as Carmack's Reverse) the result was a hugely advanced light and shadow system perfect for creating oppressive, moody environments.

Doom 3's design followed on from these techniques, taking the scarier elements of the original *Doom* and using them to build a full-blown

survival horror experience, one built not around generating a sense of power, but a sense of fear. Speaking to Polygon in 2012, id Software CEO Todd Hollenshead explained how the game's combat was designed around your flashlight, which pierced through the gloom. "The purity of the game is that you could either have the flashlight, or have the gun, it was just a choice you had to make in the game. I think that, for the game we made at the time, it was the right decision."

A TECHNOLOGICAL MARVEL

Judging by the game's initial reviews, it was the right decision. Ross Atherton awarded the game 90 in PC Gamer, while Will Porter gave it the same score in PC Zone. Yet even in these glowing reviews, there's an underlying tone of trepidation. "In 1994, we said of *Doom II* 'It's *Doom* all over again, but with more of everything that made it great in the first place'. That's still true, but today it's as much a word of caution as of recommendation," Atherton writes. Porter, meanwhile, says, "To be honest, some people may not 'get' *Doom 3* as I did – an awareness of the heritage of PC gaming and



an element of fanboyism helps in its appreciation.”

In more recent years, *Doom 3*'s reputation has diminished, with a gradual acknowledgement that although its visuals may be atmospheric, its combat is flat and sluggish, and its environments cramped and constraining. Id Software itself backtracked on some of the game's ideas post-release, altering the flashlight for the game's BFG edition so players could switch it on while holding their gun.

Doom 3 may have been a technological marvel, but outside of that, in areas like storytelling and combat design, it is heavily influenced by what other games were doing at the time. FPS conventions had changed dramatically in the years surrounding *Doom 3*'s development, with an emphasis on 'realistic' level design, scripted storytelling, and cinematic action. In his review, Atherton refers to it as “quite literally 21st century *Doom*”, a point that retains its relevance. To reiterate Hollenshead, for the game id made at the time, it was the right decision. But in the years to come, this receptiveness to trends would cause more serious problems for the granddaddy of first-person shooters. ■

“I THINK THAT,
FOR THE GAME
WE MADE AT THE
TIME, IT WAS
THE *right*
DECISION”



Doom 4's brown aesthetic marks it out as a late 2000s artefact.

Doom 4

RELEASED N/A DEVELOPER id Software

Id Software followed *Doom 3* with the expansion pack *Resurrection of Evil* (which, in another concession to popular trends, featured a *Half-Life 2*-style gravity gun) before moving onto its next project, the post-apocalyptic shooter *Rage*. But this wasn't the only game id had in the pipeline. At QuakeCon 2007, John Carmack hinted that a new *Doom* game was in development, with *Doom 4* being informally revealed the following year via a recruitment ad.

Snippets about the game trickled out across the next few years. Speaking to GameSpot in 2009, Hollenshead stated that *Doom 4* was “very much deep in development”, and that “everything I've seen on it is classic *Doom*”. When asked how it related to *Doom 3*, Hollenshead's answer was unclear, “It's not a sequel to *Doom 3*, but it's not a reboot either. *Doom 3* was sort of a reboot. It's a little bit different from those.”

Yet no specific information about *Doom 4* emerged until 2013. And when it did arrive, it wasn't good. A report by Jason Schreier for Kotaku stated that, for the past five years, id

had been developing a “rework” of *Doom II*, one so heavily inspired by *Call of Duty* that there were in-jokes referring to it as “Call of *Doom*”. “In order to be a big shooter these days, you have to have some amount of the big, bombastic movie experience,” one source stated, while another lamented that the “horror and shock elements” were “bookended by pointless shooting galleries”.

Where *Doom 3* was receptive to the ideas of shooters surrounding it, *Doom 4* was, by all accounts, in thrall to them, sacrificing the fundamental DNA of *Doom* in favour of what was believed to be popular. This was confirmed by Tim Willits in an interview with IGN in 2013: “Every game has a spirit. When you played *Rage*, you got the spirit. And [*Doom*] did not have the spirit,” he explained. “It didn't have the passion and soul of what an id game is. Everyone knows the feeling of *Doom*, but it's very hard to articulate.”

By the end of 2013, id Software was a very different studio to the one that had made *Doom 3*. John Carmack left the studio in November that year. The company was now owned by Bethesda, and *Doom 4* had been scrapped. Id had forgotten how to make *Doom*, and it would spend the next few years learning how to do it all over again. ■

DOOM TIMELINE Charting FPS history

February 1, 1991 id Software founded	December 10, 1993 <i>Doom</i> released	October 10, 1994 <i>Doom II</i> released	August 6, 1996 John Romero leaves id Software	August 3, 2004 <i>Doom 3</i> released	November 22, 2013 John Carmack leaves id Software	May 13, 2016 <i>Doom</i> (2016) released	March 20, 2020 <i>Doom Eternal</i> released	October 20, 2020 <i>Ancient Gods Part 1</i> released	March 18, 2021 <i>Ancient Gods Part 2</i> released
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Doom (2016)

RELEASED 2016 DEVELOPER id Software

With hindsight, it seems obvious *Doom 4* was destined to fail. But it's important to understand the context in which it was being made. By 2007, the linear, singleplayer FPS was already past its heyday. The massive success of *Call of Duty 4* firmly established multiplayer as the primary concern for shooters henceforth, while the likes of *Resident Evil 4*, *Gears of War* and *Uncharted* had defined third-person

games as the driving force of linear, singleplayer action. Even linearity itself was beginning to be challenged by vast open-world RPGs like *Oblivion*, a factor id Software tried to capitalise upon early in the semi-open, vehicle-strewn wastelands of *Rage*.

With *Doom 4*, id Software was trying to rule a kingdom with shrinking borders. By 2013, that kingdom was pretty much gone. If your shooter wasn't online-oriented like *CoD* or open-world like *Far Cry*, it stood little chance.

This was the challenge that id Software faced. So what was the solution? It started with asking some fundamental questions. "What do we want to make and what do we think fans want to play?" said Marty Stratton in a 2016 interview with VentureBeat. "We got some groups of people together and did a lot of looking back at the original *Doom* and *Doom II*, as well as *Doom 3*. We took a holistic approach to the question of what, fundamentally, is the DNA of *Doom*. Then we started to build around that."

Where *Doom 3*'s development had revolved around new technology, the *Doom* reboot's development was driven by game design. At the heart of this was the reboot's glory kill system, through which players could perform grisly melee executions of demons to gain additional health, helping them barrel through combat encounters rather than hiding behind cover. According to Stratton, this system gestated early in development due to id reflecting upon *Doom*'s DNA. "Our animation team at the time had put together a pretty cool demo," he explained to VentureBeat. "It was basically an animatic. It was all animation based, using creatures and guns from the previous version. It was really the genesis of the glory

ID DECIDED THE STORY SHOULD
never TAKE PRECEDENCE
OVER THE ACTION

kill system, as well as the inspiration for some of the push-forward combat.”

HYPERREAL COMBAT

As early as mid-2013, id Software had a playable core to *Doom* that Stratton says was “as solid as anything we’d done prior to that” aggressive, propulsive and, above all, fun. All the other creative decisions emanated from that core. The level design, for example, should take inspiration from multiplayer arenas, facilitating the players fast movement abilities. The art should be bright and vivid, like a comic book or heavy metal album, to complement your character’s hyperreal combat capabilities. Even the game’s technological focus was influenced by the core design philosophy, with id’s engine devs prioritising performance for id-tech 6 and targeting the best-looking experience at a consistent 60fps.

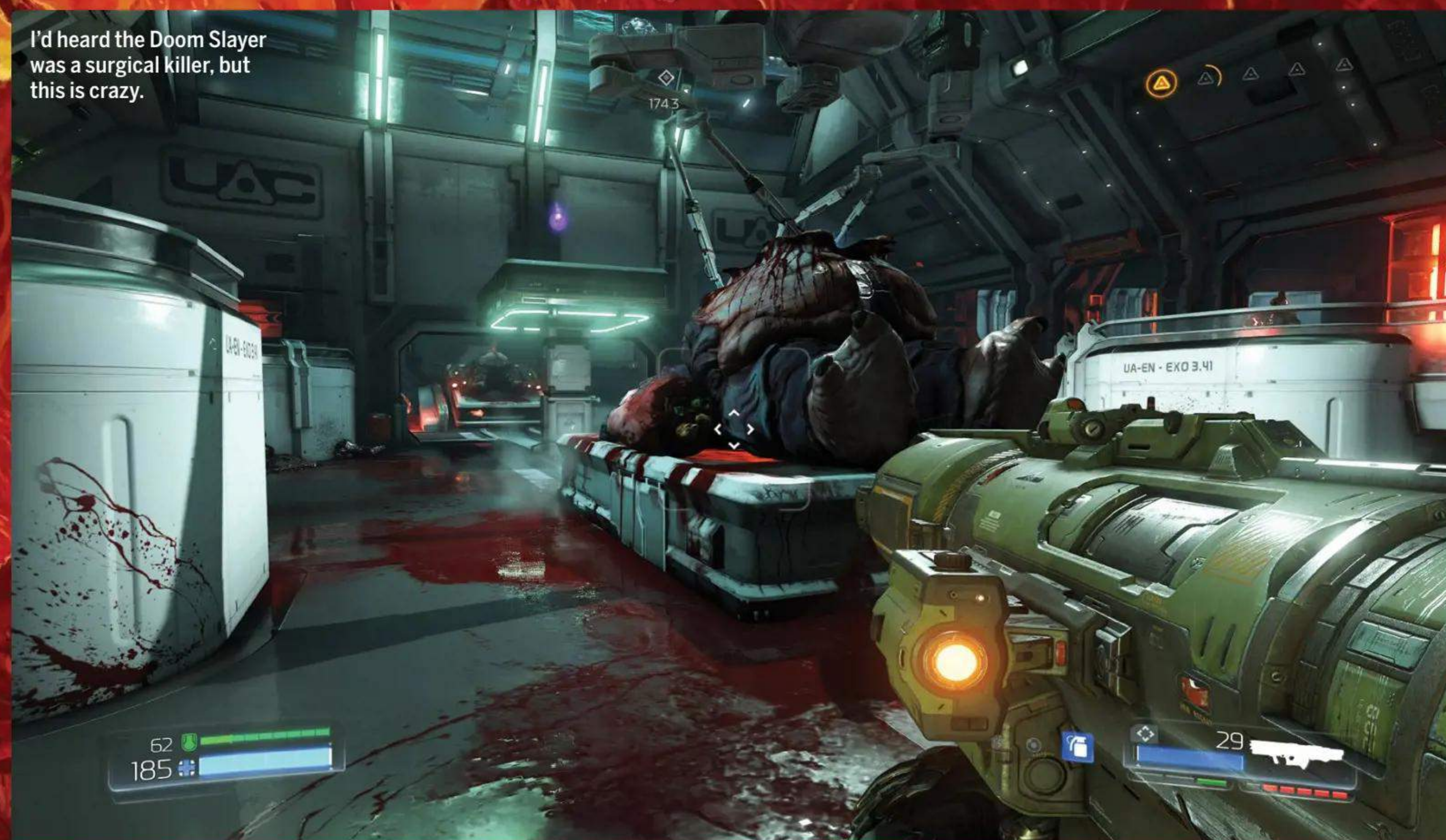
Perhaps most importantly of all, id decided the story should never take precedence over the action, echoing John Carmack’s design thoughts for the original *Doom*.

Stratton cites a moment early in the game designed very much to set the tone. “That first thing, where Samuel [Hayden] tries to talk to you and you throw the monitor away, that was very much, ‘I’m here to kill demons.’”

The end result was a renewed vision for the linear, singleplayer FPS, the polar opposite of id Software’s plans for *Doom 4*, and something largely out of step with popular FPS conventions of the time. It was also excellent. “With *Doom*’s campaign, id Software found a sweet spot nestled somewhere between nostalgia and modernity that celebrates the pulpy sheen of big-budget shooters and resurrects an intense, simplified focus on the shooting itself,” wrote James Davenport in PC Gamer’s review,

awarding it a score of 88. That might be a little lower than the 90 of *Doom 3* and the 94 of *Doom II*, but it’s worth noting that not everything in *Doom*’s reboot worked. If you forgot that *Doom 2016* shipped with a multiplayer mode, for example, that wouldn’t be surprising given how flat and lacking in personality it was. The game also featured a ‘Snapmap’ level editor that was interesting in theory, but too constrained in its toolset to facilitate a mapping community.

Crucially, though, the important part of *Doom*’s reboot, the singleplayer campaign, worked. Moreover, it proved that linear, singleplayer shooters could still be innovative and successful at the highest levels of development. ■



THE ALTERNATE DOOM *Doom has seen various alternate versions and spinoffs*



THE ULTIMATE DOOM 1995

The retail version of *Doom*, sold with an additional episode.



FINAL DOOM 1996

A standalone ‘third entry’ in the *Doom* series, built by TeamTNT and Dario and Milo Casali.



DOOM 64 1997

An entirely separate version of *Doom* for Nintendo 64 developed by Midway Games.



DOOM RPG 2005

A mobile version of *Doom* with added RPG elements developed by John Carmack.



DOOM VFR 2017

A short VR spinoff based on the *Doom* reboot. The F stands for exactly what you think.

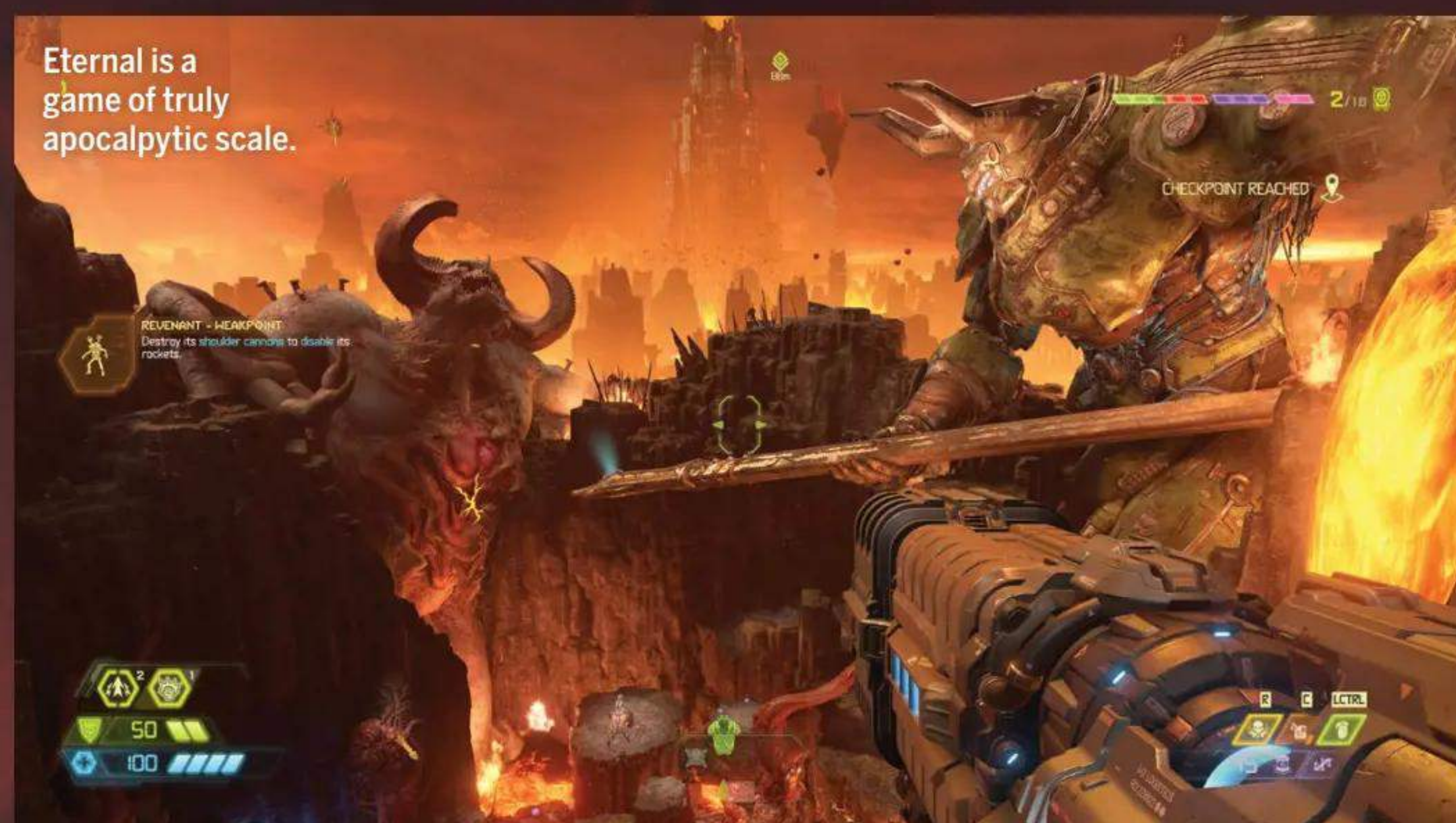
Doom Eternal

RELEASED 2020 DEVELOPER id Software

Building a game that genuinely lives up to *Doom*'s monstrous reputation is no mean feat, and you'd think that id Software would be satisfied with what it pulled off in 2016's reboot. But the studio believed it could do better. "As fun as the last *Doom* was, there was a monotony to it," said Marty Stratton to PC Gamer in 2019. "In the later levels especially it felt like corridor, arena, corridor, arena."

For the sequel, *Doom Eternal*, id Software wanted to blow the doors off. "From the very start to the final boss, players will be seeing things they'd never expect from a *Doom* game." At the heart of this was, again, the glory kill system. But id Software would take the idea of exploiting enemies to your advantage and massively expand it. Now, you'd be able to burn enemies with a shoulder-mounted flamethrower, causing them to drop armour when shot. Each demon would also have specific vulnerabilities to certain weapons, enabling you to take them out quicker and letting id pile on greater pressure. In short, no longer would

"AS LONG AS THE SOLUTION TO EVERY PROBLEM INVOLVES THE PLAYER BEING aggressive SOMEHOW, IT FEELS LIKE DOOM"



you be killing mindlessly, your attacks would be precise and devastating.

Eternal applied this expansive approach to the rest of the game too. It would greatly increase the number of locations players visited, adding Earth and the celestial realm of Sentinel to the Martian moonbases and infernal hellscape of the original. It would also make those spaces more intricate, giving the Doom Slayer more ways to traverse them, requiring players to “think [their] way through the level design” as described by Stratton. It would double the number of demons in the game, lend context to the Doom Slayer’s origins through a more involved story. It would even feature a *Dark Souls*-style invasion mode.

As a sequel, *Eternal* intended a far more extensive overhaul than *Doom II* did over the 1993 original.

But with adding all this stuff came a risk, namely losing sight of the gleeful simplicity at the heart of the series. Does *Doom* need a more involved story, or platforming sequences? Id Software was confident it could get the tone right. “As long as the solution to every problem involves the player being aggressive somehow, it feels like *Doom*,” Stratton said to PC Gamer.

When *Eternal* arrived in 2020, the initial response was ecstatic. “*Doom Eternal* is a celebration of excess. Excess in sin, in violence, scale, speed and volume. I’ve never played a shooter this intense and demanding,” said James Davenport in his PC Gamer review, awarding the game a score of 94. In the wake of release, however, criticisms of the game began to grow. That the added story elements bogged the game down.

That the platforming elements were unnecessary and annoying. Perhaps the most significant was that the combat was too restrictive, with particular focus on the Marauder, an enemy that required players to respond to their attacks in a specific pattern.

Id Software was bullish in the face of such criticism, with *Eternal* creative director Hugo Martin insisting that the Marauder was “crystallising everything about the game”. Nonetheless, there is a sense that *Eternal* experienced a more problematic development to 2016’s *Doom*. The hotly touted invasion-based multiplayer was not available on release and was ultimately cancelled, with id Software blaming “the unforeseen consequences of the pandemic and remote working” for its absence, and instead focusing on a singleplayer horde mode. Meanwhile, *Eternal*’s composer Mick Gordon described *Eternal* as a “difficult project”, stating that he and the entire *Eternal* team experienced brutal crunch, and accusing Stratton of poor management, accusations that Stratton rejects.

Yet while *Eternal* may have endured a rougher critical and developmental ride than its predecessor. Today, the consensus is that it is probably the best singleplayer FPS around. Unlike the 2016 reboot, *Eternal* is a game that takes time to master. But once you have mastered it, it offers a level of thrill and intensity unlike any other singleplayer shooter. The two expansions that followed *Eternal* pushed those ideas to the limit, demonstrating the full potential of the Doom Slayer’s combat abilities.

Looking back across the last three decades, what’s most remarkable about *Doom*’s history is not simply that the series remains relevant, but that it remains relevant at both ends of the timeline. The games currently being made by id are at the cutting edge of FPS design, finding new ways to distil the formula first concocted 30 years ago. Meanwhile, the original games made by Romero and Carmack are omnipresent. They still play superbly, and form the basis for a modding community that is still coming up with fresh, exciting ideas. In both its old form and the new, *Doom* is, indeed, eternal. ■

DAD MOD Here’s a selection of the best Doom mods



BRUTAL DOOM

What started as an effort to make *Doom* even gorier has become almost a game in its own right, adding new weapons, levels, mechanics like headshots and stealth kills, and abilities like kicks and driveable vehicles.



ALIENS: THE ULTIMATE DOOM

“What if X but in *Doom*?” is one of the classic premises for *Doom* mods. *Aliens: The Ultimate Doom* is perhaps the best example, featuring an eight-map campaign all themed around Ridley Scott’s sci-fi horror universe.



MYHOUSE

What begins as a seemingly simple effort to recreate the modder’s home in *Doom* quickly evolves into a twisting descent into eerie horror with multiple routes that all have different consequences.

FEATURE

The Best Non-Traditional War Games



PC GAMER

THE BEST NON-TRADITIONAL WAR GAMES

Is it possible for wargamers to
give peace a chance?

By Matt Killeen



S

hoot = 1. Wait = 0.
Hit = 1. Miss = 0.
The language
of videogame
technology lends
itself to conflict.
It's been part of

its DNA since *Spacewar!* took MIT
by storm in 1962, and
we've been playing war
on the tabletop, from
Chess to *Risk*, for
thousands of years. But...

War is a preoccupation of
mine. As a writer of
historical fiction, I'm
immersed in battle. It's a
dark fascination, especially
for a pacifist of sorts, but
wars show humanity at its
very best and its very, very
worst. They are the turning

points of history itself. We are
defined by them.

I'm also a gamer, and love
sneaking and sniping, dropping
bombs and torpedoing ships.

However, that can often provoke
moral questions that I struggle to
answer. Besides, we're in a period of

high-profile conflict, again,
and it's on our screens,
24/7. We may crave
escapism at times like
these, but should we make
fictional war when there
are so many for whom it's
a daily reality?

So, I set out to find war
games playable today on
PC that don't ask you to
do that, at all. This was
not an easy ride by any
means, and I found varying
degrees of success for sure.

THE RULES

1. Not just pacifist
runs, but games
that are built around
their nonviolence.

2. Healer characters
in squad shooters
don't count.

3. No anti-war
videogames, like
Spec-Ops: The Line,
or *The Great War:
Western Front*.

RELEASED Jan 2024 DEVELOPER Brave Lamb Studio SA

War Hospital

Playing medical administrator on the Western Front

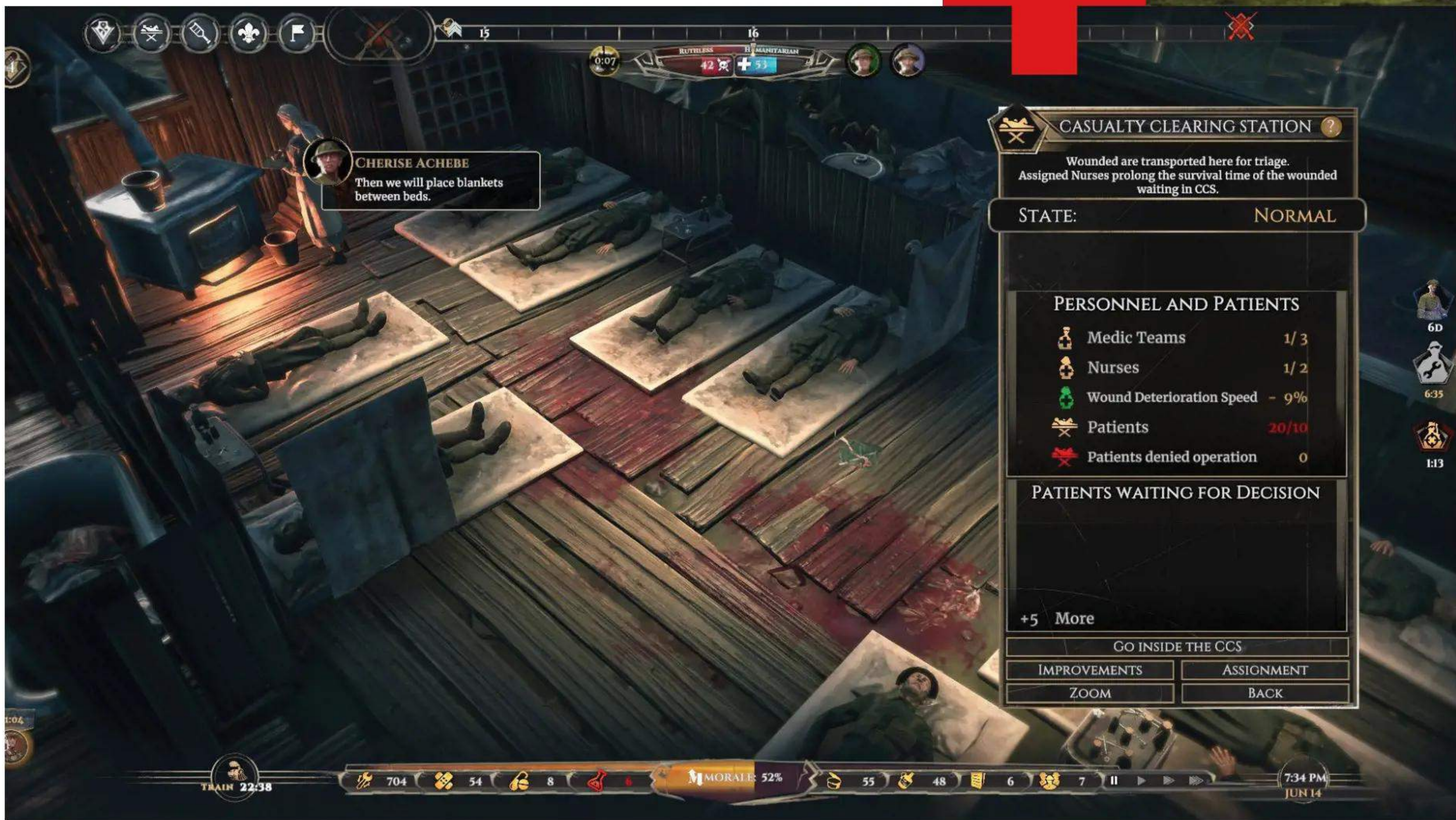
The First World War is solid ground for a pacifist narrative. Never has the futility of the whole mess been writ as large as on the Western Front. *War Hospital* puts you in charge of a failing field hospital on the very edge of the trenches in 1918, balancing morale, resources and staffing to save as many lives as possible.

‘It’s called triage’ is a stock trope for murderous villains in many media, but this simulation comes down to the infamous trolley problem. Do you kill one person if it means saving more? Here, the yawning horror of shuffling the critical cases into the “Denied” file and consigning them to death so that your tired surgeons can save others, is occasionally

punctuated with their curses and invective. It’s especially hard watching them deteriorate, waiting for a surgery slot that just isn’t coming. There’s a narrative, but you soon find yourself opting out of the humanity of it all. You start out reading everyone’s file, prioritising family men or the particularly interesting cases, but in short order you’re just looking at their wounds and making a cold calculation. You stop noticing the absence of regret in the aftermath. Your cold ruthlessness is an asset, and the next wave of injured is just around the corner. It’s deeply chilling.

Then, as patients recover, you end up sending them back to the trenches a few miles away, otherwise you’ll be overrun. It’s another case of triage that feels like a betrayal.

CHARGING AROUND IN
YOUR BULLDOZER IS
FUN AND CLEARING
AN AREA IS VERY
SATISFYING





RELEASED Jan 2023 DEVELOPER Madnetic

WWII Rebuilder

Cleaning up after conflict

I expected a city builder of some kind, balancing Marshall Plan money with a lack of resources in Europe post-WWII, but what I got was a mix of *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* and *House Flipper*. Clear away the ruins and detritus of the conflict by hammer, shovel or machine, before renovating and repairing each area. Then, step inside a waiting shadowy figure to witness the world at war.

Charging around in your bulldozer is fun, and clearing an area is very satisfying, even if the building itself is a bit underwhelming, and you have the option of continuing the beautification work in a sandbox mode once your tasks are complete. It can be a bit fiddly, especially when doing brickwork, and suffers from some annoying inconsistencies, but there are some great snippets about historical events and some lovely details. If cutting metal at Morrigan Station is your thing, you'll find much to like here.

RELEASED Nov 2020 DEVELOPER Gard

Field Hospital: Dr Taylor's Story

Alt-history WWII triage

Treading some of the same ground, this game concentrates on the triage aspect of your alt-history WWII field hospital, while investigating... something. It's not immediately clear why you're looking back at Dr Taylor's past from the present day, but you flash back to his wartime exploits and you've a job to do. The severity of your patients' injuries isn't the clearest, and I think you're supposed to be making judgements based on their bio. As a fictional war, your decisions lack punch, and it suffers from tonal issues.





IF I CARRY ON, MY
CHILD WILL BE KILLED
BY RAIDERS, OR GET
SICK AND I WON'T
HAVE MEDICINE

RELEASED Nov 2014 DEVELOPER 11 bit studios

This War of Mine – Final Cut

Dealing with the terror of war from a civilian point of view

This is the poster-child for this kind of game, a creation of such reputation that although I own copies on three different formats, I've never played it before. I've never felt up to it.

In a besieged city in a civil war, the population hides out from the snipers in the daylight hours. Come the night, they venture out for supplies or stay home on guard against raiders. It makes you question your ethics and your values. It makes you question everything. Having children in your care is excruciating. The hard choices

you usually make in a household of adults multiply. You've been up all night. You have to upgrade your crafting table, eat and then sleep in the few hours allowed to you. There's no food, so you need to go out again tonight. But your daughter wants to talk. She needs to talk. She's lonely and sad and will only get more so, unless you play with her. Depressed children don't want to play, they only grow worse. So, you don't sleep.

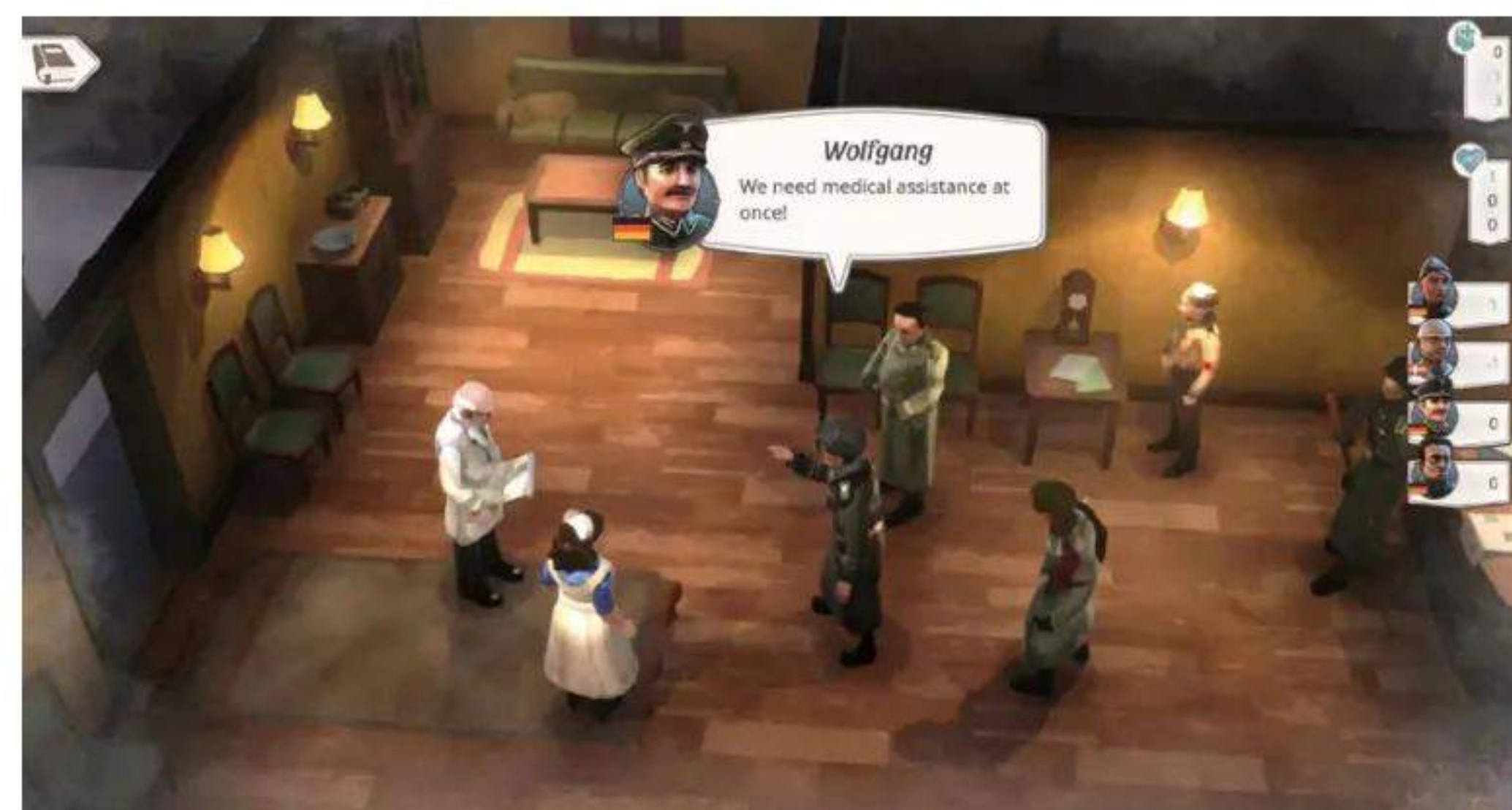
I go to an abandoned property to scavenge only to find it occupied by an old couple. This is their house. These are their things. They are too weak to stop me, but the game is clear – this would be theft. I can't

do it. I'm not willing to trade my humanity for resources. Then, I return home to find raiders have attacked my home, stolen my food and medical supplies, before wounding my daughter. I feel ashamed. I feel conned. Angry.

I want to stop playing this game constantly. If I carry on, my child will be killed by raiders, or get sick and I won't have medicine, or I'll be wounded and leave her all alone. The tension gives me a stomach-ache. Waiting 32 days for the end of a story just makes me think of the siege of Sarajevo, which lasted 1,425 days.

The fact that there are people who have gone through this and are going through this, for real, right now, is even more painful. Approved by the charity War Child, *This War of Mine* is a brilliant game, perfectly crafted. You don't rail at the mechanics, but at the evil that men do. It is an empathy machine, an almost perfect work of art. And if it upsets you... good. That's how things are.

The Best Non-Traditional War Games



RELEASED Sept 2021 DEVELOPER DON'T NOD

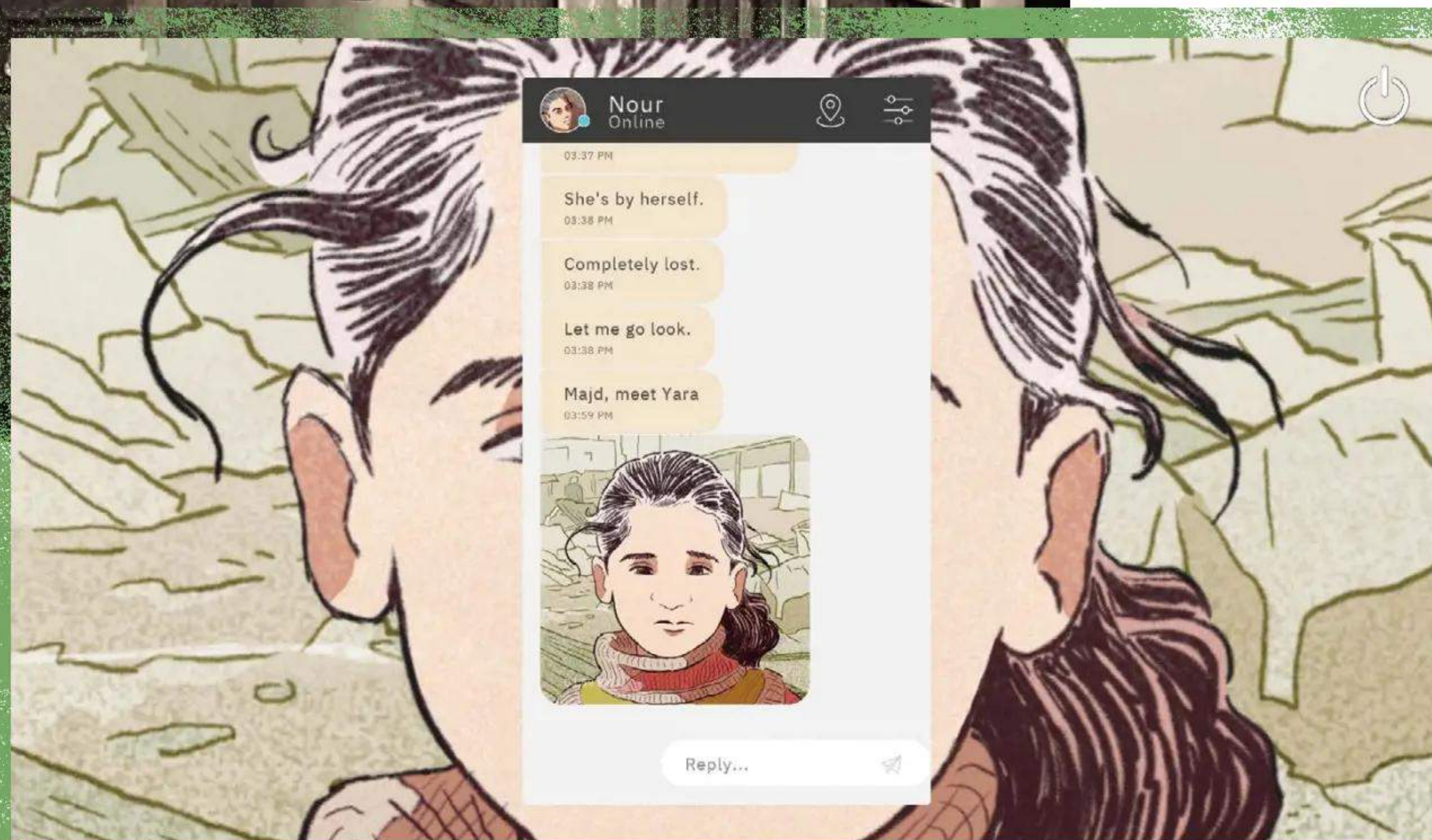
Gerda: A Flame in Winter

Walking a tightrope in Nazi Germany

Narrative RPGs heavy in dialogue choices can live or die by the authenticity and significance of the resulting consequences, but here the most routine decision will come back to bite you. You play as Gerda, a German-Danish nurse in a small, German-occupied Danish town in the dying days of the war. You've a Nazi father and a husband neck-deep in the resistance and you're about to have quite the week.

You're no warrior. Like much of the population, you've just kept your head down, but as the war comes to an end, that isn't an option any more. Every decision you make, from the mundane to the pivotal, affects how others see you, and that can be a dangerous thing, surrounded by those either complicit in the occupation or emboldened by the decline of the Third Reich. It's highly instructive in just how difficult it must have been to tread the line between staying out of trouble and becoming a collaborator, or doing the right thing and getting yourself killed.

Even before my husband is arrested by the Gestapo, I treated a Nazi for burns and now my boss thinks I'm on their side. In doing so I enabled an unpredictable German officer to steal painkillers that we're bound to need down the line. And how far will I go to get Anders released? You can save, but you can't go back without restarting. You have to live with the choices, and enemies, you've made. When you're done, you get to play the DLC as Liva, the Resistance leader, and presumably shoot whoever you want, but I'm assuming that too has a cost.



RELEASED Jan 2019 DEVELOPER PID Games

Bury Me, My Love

Escaping war-torn Syria

War drives a great many people over borders to seek shelter, so it would be remiss not to include at least one refugee tale here. Less a game than a visual novel, *Bury Me, My Love* is a series of text conversations between Nour and her partner Majd, as she undertakes the long journey from war-torn Syria to safety.

The dialogue options have been accused of being too mundane, but the sheer ordinariness of the interaction as life and death choices are made is subtly powerful. Even then, I found that subsequent playthroughs making different choices gave me a much more intense experience, so your mileage may vary.

The PC version is less resonant than when played on mobile, whose real-time mode can leave you waiting tense hours for news that Nour is still alive, but these are minor issues in a valuable and emotional piece of work.

RELEASED June 2014 DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montpellier

Valiant Hearts: The Great War

Surviving on both sides

A PLAYABLE HISTORY, WITH A WEALTH OF
EXTRA MATERIAL TO LOOK THROUGH

RELEASED Jan 2020 DEVELOPER Paintbucket

Through The Darkest of Times

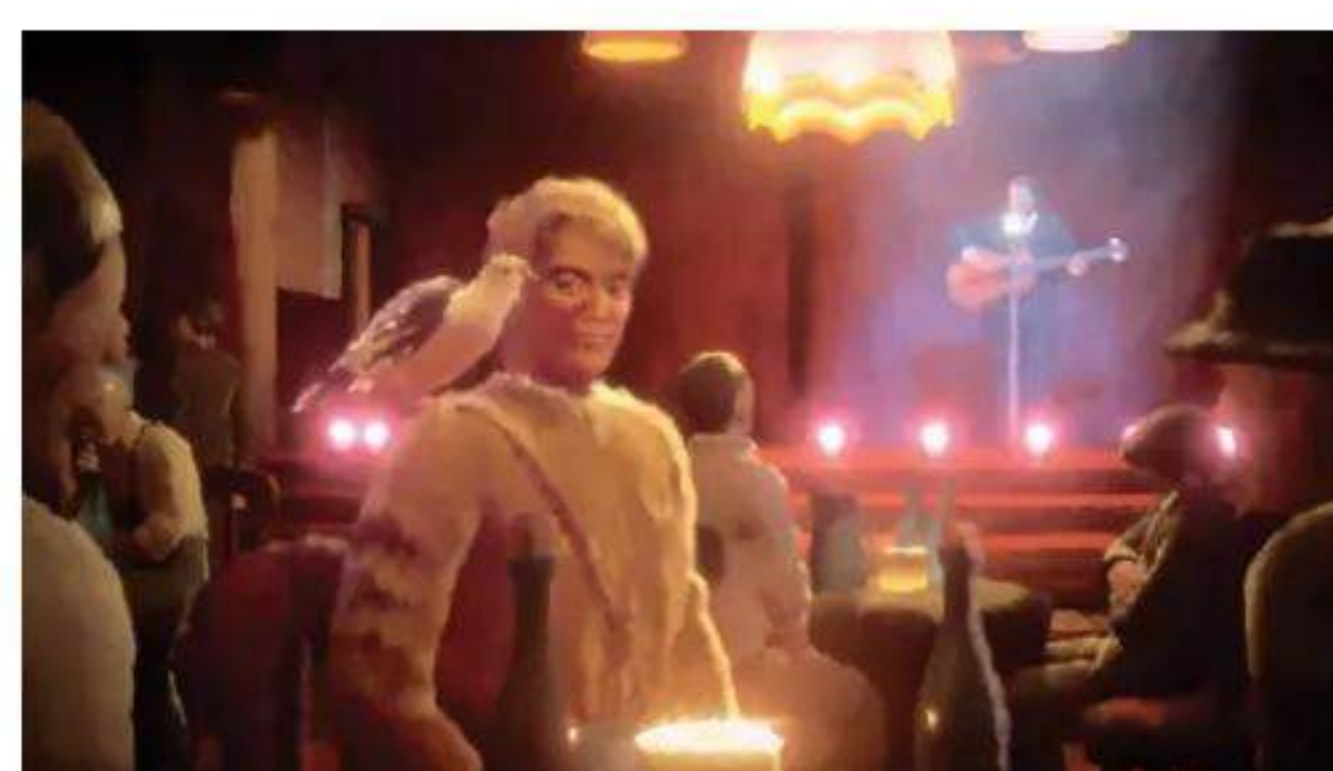
Running the Resistance

I'm cheating slightly including this, as it begins in 1933 as Hitler takes power in Germany, but defying tyranny is a wargame staple. Here you play as a Berlin resident trying to run a Resistance cell as the Nazis tighten their grip and grow ever more vicious and terrifying. I muddled through, much as an amateur anarchist might, and you don't have much effect at first. It is insanely difficult to raise funds or support without drawing attention to yourself, and you end up spending all your time and resources busting your team out of jail.

Director Yoan Fanise made two games bookending the centenary of World War I. The first was *Valiant Hearts* for Ubisoft Montpellier in 2014.

Reminiscent of a LucasArts point-and-click, the game is rendered in a cartoon style used by the satirical illustrations of the day, and this level of comic absurdity totally works with the material.

A family is separated and find themselves on opposite sides of the Great War as they suffer its horrors – the trenches, imprisonment, suffering and loss. You do fight, which should exclude this game, but it mostly consists of trying not to die, avoiding shells and gunfire, or clearing obstructions. Its commitment to not killing the enemy just about absolves it. It's a playable history, with a wealth of extra material to look through, provided by the documentary *Apocalypse World War I*.



RELEASED Nov 2018 DEVELOPER DigixArt

11-11 Memories Retold

War in a dual narrative

Fanise then founded DigixArt and, in a collaboration with Aardman Animations, released *11-11 Memories Retold* in 2018. A game with a dual narrative, it

tells the stories of a Canadian war photographer and a grieving German father whose search for his son turns into a quest for revenge.

It's altogether less effective than *Valiant Hearts*, managing to feel worthy to the detriment of the narrative. Furthermore, for all the wonders that Aardman Animations has managed in the past, the art style here is a serious distraction. It's supposed to ape the impressionists but it detracts from both the story and the sense of wonder and dismay that we're supposed to be feeling.

Meanwhile, there's a lot of awkward walking about, basic puzzling and collecting that doesn't need to be there. Finally, the endings feel unfair and contradictory, but maybe that's the point. This is the story of a world gone mad.

RELEASED Sept 2017 DEVELOPER Bohemia

ARMA 3: Laws of War

Removing mines as an NGO

There are few games that fetishise warfare like *ARMA*, so it was somewhat of a surprise when the *Laws of War* DLC landed in 2017. A laudable effort to touch upon the complexity and consequences of conflict on the landscape and population, it features an NGO tasked with removing mines and unexploded ordnance after the wars on Altis, with a mini-campaign, educational materials and simulations to play through in VR, plus a donation to the real International Committee of the Red Cross in the asking price. Playing at mine clearance does lack a certain spark, and the campaign keeps flashing you back into combat roles, several of which demand you commit war crimes. While the writing is decent, the commentary on warfare is muddled by the fictional nature of the war's history, as is adding cluster munitions to the main game. If you don't play regularly, you'll need to weather the lengthy tutorial scenarios; and you'll have to kill a lot of people to get to the humanitarian bits.





RELEASED TBA 2024 DEVELOPER Hypnotic Ants

Medic: Pacific War

Step into the shoes of a medic on the front line

A game with a launch date and boasting developers with credits on *The Witcher 3* and *Dying Light*, *Medic: Pacific War* is exactly what I was looking for – a full-on, third-person-

not-shooter that marries stealth, action and an active battlefield in a unique challenge. Hypnotic Ants Studio has run a modestly successful Kickstarter campaign, given us a trailer brimming with potential and even a closed playtest.

A THIRD-PERSON-NOT SHOOTER THAT MARRIES STEALTH, ACTION AND AN ACTIVE BATTLEFIELD



RELEASED May 2018 DEVELOPER Stas Shostak

Save One More

Help wounded soldiers

Combat medics were often conscientious objectors who went into battle unarmed and in the most perilous circumstances, wherever the fighting was fiercest. Supposedly protected by the Geneva Convention, they were frequently fired upon and always at risk. *Save One More* seeks to replicate this with a twitchy and highly stylised arcade game, where you join your squad through battle, zapping them back to life when they're hurt. You're invariably forced to lead the men, which defeats the point a little, and then within two minutes, you see a surrendering enemy shot by a firing squad, who call him a coward.



RELEASED TBA DEVELOPER Gav + Josh

Combat Medic

Save lives in isometric 2D

In the realm of vapourware, *Combat Medic* is a game that purports to do much the same as *Save One More*, in a retro style, but with a greater complexity of treatment options. It's the work of duo Gavin Halliday and Joshua Fall. There's no release date but we'll keep our fingers crossed.

CEASEFIRE AND AFTER-ACTION REPORT



I spent most of the time working on this piece concealing the many and various horrors from my curious eight-year-old. Non-violent does not mean nice, at all.

In fact, it usually means considering war as it really is – “humanity hanging from a cross of iron”. I told him that *This War of Mine* had made me sad, and he told me I should stop and play *Wobbledogs* instead. Yet, the sense of reward that comes with some of these games eclipses many high-octane shooters. Finding a can of food AND painkillers AND getting home in one piece has found a place among my favourite videogame

moments. The power of something that feels so consequential cannot be underestimated.

Can you make war that feels that purposeful? We do like creating enemies that you can gun down without troubling your conscience, as in *Wolfenstein*, but that comes with its own issues. Dehumanisation is at the heart of most real war and atrocity. Many Holocaust scholars deplore the disconnection between the cartoon-like Nazis you shoot, and their real crimes.

This is a balance that videogames struggle with, but how do you even begin to make that game? Maybe I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one.





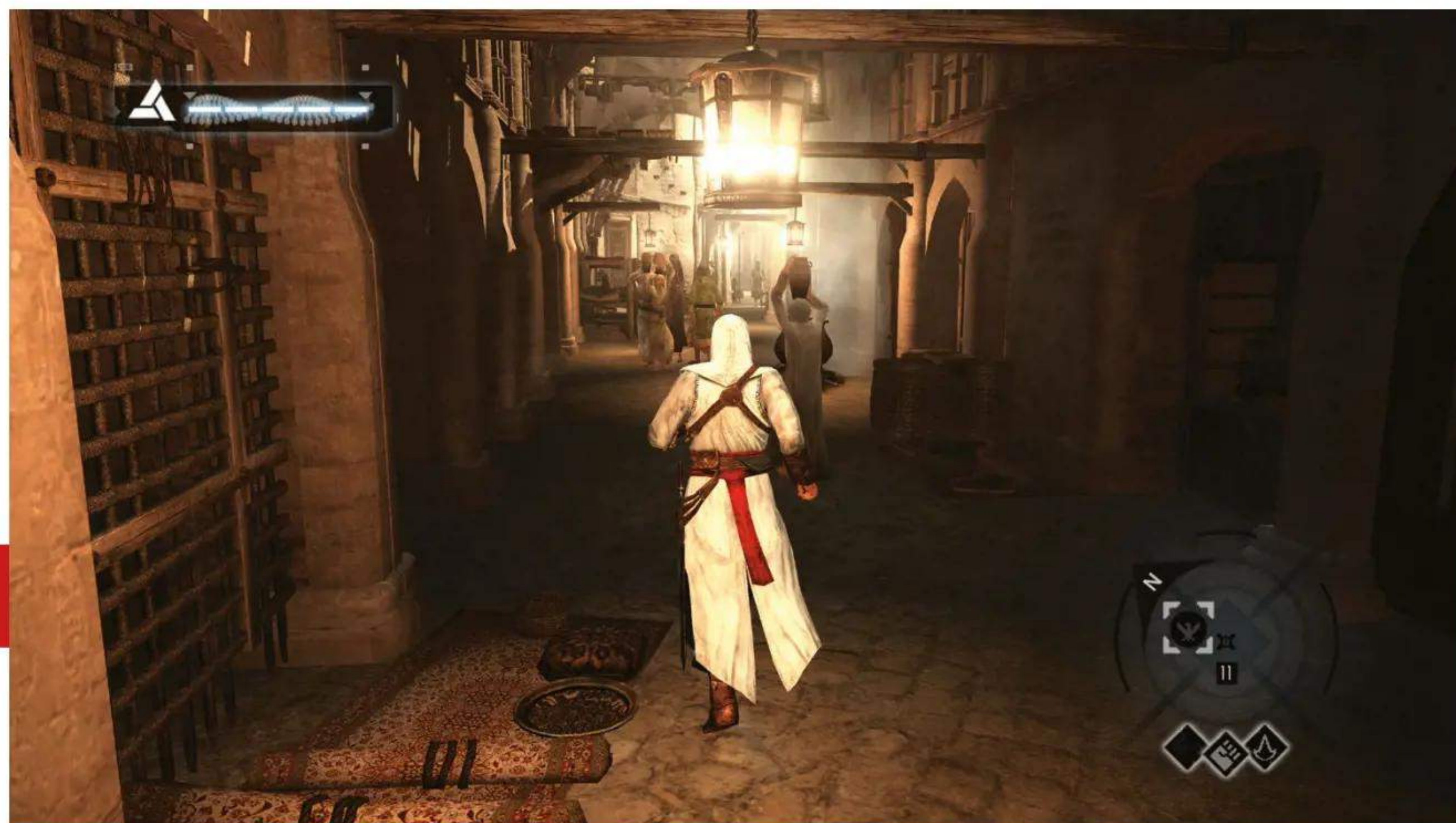
LEAP *of*

FAITH

Chronicling the **ASSASSIN'S CREED** saga on PC. *By Kyle Hoekstra*

A

cross 13 mainline entries, the best-selling series has explored Renaissance Italy, North America in revolt and exotic ancient worlds, with every game stretching in new directions to create a breathtaking open world, while retaining indisputable *Assassin's Creed* qualities. Here, we traverse the history of the series.



Assassin's Creed *2007, PC 2008*

Stay your blade from the flesh of an innocent, hide in plain sight, and never compromise the Brotherhood: the Assassin tenets, as instructed by Master Al-Mualim to an insolent Altaïr early in *Assassin's Creed*, set the irresistible conspiratorial tone for the franchise to follow.

Assassin's Creed famously had its roots in a new take on *Prince of Persia*. Instead, the team at Ubisoft Montreal including Patrice Désilets, who fostered the original concept, delivered an anti-prince. He could still climb, but now the platforms embraced the contours of a city. The freedom in traversal was revelatory, and it's striking how successful the first iteration still feels overall. The central character they conceived was not a romantic hero who belonged in *One Thousand and One Nights*, but a cold-hearted killer of princes, a calculating bastard despised even by his colleagues.

During the game, Altaïr would hone his instincts in accordance with the ancient, mysterious creed. Players would be able to stalk targets, plan

their routes for dispatching them, and retreat – all without being seen. This was the promise of *Assassin's Creed*'s E3 2006 trailer, which sees our Assassin in now iconic garb stabbing with his hidden blade and vanishing into a group of scholars. In practice, players weren't so much hidden blades as counter-riposting battering rams. The fantasy of this secretive sect, working from the shadows to execute strategies of their own making, never really squared with the formulaic gameplay, whose design failed to keep pace with everything else.

Missions expected a predictable routine of pickpocketing or eavesdropping for information, before progressing towards a final assassination target: a traitor, a grand master, or a merchant. Approaching targets through different environments affords some sandbox imagination, but missions just as often end in a slog of clobbering guards than a swift heart-quickenning exfiltration. *Assassin's Creed* proved its fundamentals, but exhausted them as they repeated through the game.

Yet even when it failed, it was special. Because it answered a question: what would it be like to relive the past? More specifically,

what would it be like to inhabit the Middle East of the Third Crusade in 1191, and to see it from the ground and from the heights of its famous cities? From the mountain refuge at Masyaf, where winding passages led from its village to a formidable stronghold, players journeyed across the Holy Land. Each city had an identity: Acre, distinguished by its Frankish buildings bearing the scars of sieges, acquired a bluish tint;

Jerusalem, in greener hues, featured iconic sites like the Dome of the Rock. Players heard the soundtrack of hymns and oud strings mingle with metalworking, traders' voices, birdsong and livestock. Yet of its locales, the Kingdom, a hub which spoke out to the different regions, is memorable only for its tedium.

In building the world its designers landed upon a cracking, and thereafter trademark, collectible. Located on the tallest structures, viewpoints remain hard to resist. They can be 'synchronised' to reveal the local area on the minimap, triggering an animation showcasing the environment.

UNRIVALLED FIDELITY

Not only did *Assassin's Creed* deliver on players' curiosity with a world of unrivalled fidelity, it provided a tantalising science fiction rationale for how it might be possible. In the present day, the Abstergo Corporation harvests the genetic memories of Desmond, a man apparently pulled off the street and strapped into a machine: the Animus. Walking around Abstergo's offices is as boring today as it was then. But the extradiegetic plot increasingly drew focus as it became clear that Altaïr's boss Al-Mualim sought to exploit the same powerful, pre-human artefact, an Apple of Eden, as Abstergo. They, in turn, were revealed to be modern day Templars.

Assassin's Creed set players down a path of intrigue that exploded into one of the most famous brands in videogames. In hindsight, it's incredible that the original's missions didn't capitalise on its own novel mechanics by embracing the assassin fantasy more firmly.



**HONE HIS INSTINCTS
IN ACCORDANCE
WITH THE ANCIENT,
MYSTERIOUS CREED**



**EZIO STARTS THE
HUNT FOR TEMPLAR
LEADER RODRIGO
BORGIA, THE FUTURE
POPE ALEXANDER VI**

Assassin's Creed II

2009, PC 2010

One of the best sequels in gaming steered an unexpected new course to achieve new heights of popularity, and its secret weapon was its hero. No, not Desmond, but his 15th century Italian ancestor: Ezio Auditore da Firenze. A suave bachelor of the Renaissance, Ezio is vivid and possessed of youthful naivete when we meet him, where Altair was merely a silhouette.

When members of his family are executed in Florence's Piazza della Signoria as part of a Templar plot, Ezio starts the hunt for Templar leader Rodrigo Borgia, the future Pope Alexander VI. While its sci-fi framing continued, the historical narrative saw Ezio recruit allies in Leonardo da Vinci, Caterina Sforza and Niccolò Machiavelli across Florence and Venice, smaller locations in San Gimignano and Forlì, towards even the Vatican in Rome.

Assassin's Creed II crucially delivered on the fun that could be had in such a unique setting. It added more ways of beating and evading enemies. A foe could be disarmed and their polearm used

against them, or assassinated with one of several new moves. Hiring mercenaries, courtesans or thieves let you bypass guards entirely, while parkour was refined with wall-ejects and corner swings – although the best thing about that is the clink of footfall on terracotta roof tiles. You could also manage your 'notoriety', accrued through conspicuous activity, by killing spies and tearing down posters.

The game's period architecture, warmed by a bolder colour palette, helped build a more sensuous impression of a place and made the original's Middle Ages look like a glum time indeed. Although, unluckily, Monteriggioni suffered a mask of murky green post-processing. A database yielded contextual information as you explored.

The sequel added a few light RPG elements, such as being able to spend money on customisable kit in tailors and blacksmiths, and to landlord over your family estate in Monteriggioni, and see it prosper through investing in shops. In doing so *Assassin's Creed II* set the precedent for much of what was to come. Its success gave credence to Ubisoft's efforts to scale it into a franchise in the years ahead.

BLADE IN THE CROWD

The anatomy of an assassin

1 COWL
The Assassins' hood is essential to their distinctive look and evolved from efforts to associate the first protagonist with an eagle.

2 HIDDEN BLADE
The signature weapon extends from the wrist like a talon; Valhalla's Eivor wears it like a badge of honour.

3 LEGS
Scaling entire cities acrobatically without losing breath calls for superior calves and cardio, something Assassins never seem to worry about.





Assassin's Creed Revelations 2011

Revelations wrapped up Ezio's trilogy, sending our hero eastwards to Constantinople. *Revelations* was originally to be a mobile game, and it sometimes feels like it, with Constantinople contrasting with previous settings mostly in art direction. It's a work of narrative surgery: Ezio's journey in *Revelations* in fact begins, and ends, with him poking through an assassin library at Masyaf, turning Ezio's last act into a farewell for Altaïr as well. Desmond's tale, meanwhile, approaches its climax: in a coma since *Brotherhood*, his excavation of what Altaïr did with his Apple of Eden via Ezio is key to discovering a way to avert an impending solar flare.



Assassin's Creed Brotherhood 2010, PC 2011

Brotherhood picked up immediately where *Assassin's Creed II* ended, with Ezio escaping the Vatican after having spared Rodrigo Borgia and come face-to-face with a First Civilisation entity. Ezio's first outing was excellent, but his return was even better. The murderous Borgia

siblings Cesare and Lucrezia took centre stage on an impressive tableau of Rome, the biggest and deepest city in the series so far. Its ancient and baroque spectacles play host to inventive missions, while its many (but not extraneous) side-activities like the capture of Borgia Towers marry closely with the game's drive of liberating Rome. The city could be

interacted with in other ways; through renovations like Montiriggioni before it, and through the ability to recruit and deploy assassins in battle. *Brotherhood* introduced something else unique: a multiplayer mode pitting wannabe assassins against each other in cat-and-mouse chicanery, which was actually pretty decent.



CONNOR'S JOURNEY
ENDED UP FEELING
A WORLD APART
FROM EZIO'S



Assassin's Creed III 2012

To reinvent the franchise in a post-Ezio world, *Assassin's Creed III* aimed big, taking on the American Revolution. It introduced as its lead Ratonhnhaké:ton, alias Connor, an inspired decision warranting an exploration of his Native American heritage alongside the event around which the game is poised: the expulsion of the British from America. Connor donned his Assassin cloak over moccasin boots and a tomahawk, with colonial trimmings – including a pistol

– with which he blended into Boston and New York. Here baroque architecture was exchanged for colonial clapboards and condottieri for British redcoats. And in place of grand cathedrals, Connor scrambled and hunted across the Frontier, a region bigger than *Brotherhood's* Rome.

Connor's journey ended up feeling a world apart from Ezio's. His string of bad luck did include being outshone in his own game by his dad, who Ubisoft boldly has opening the game as a false protagonist before revealing him to be a Templar.

VIRTUAL TOURIST

How to spend your time in history

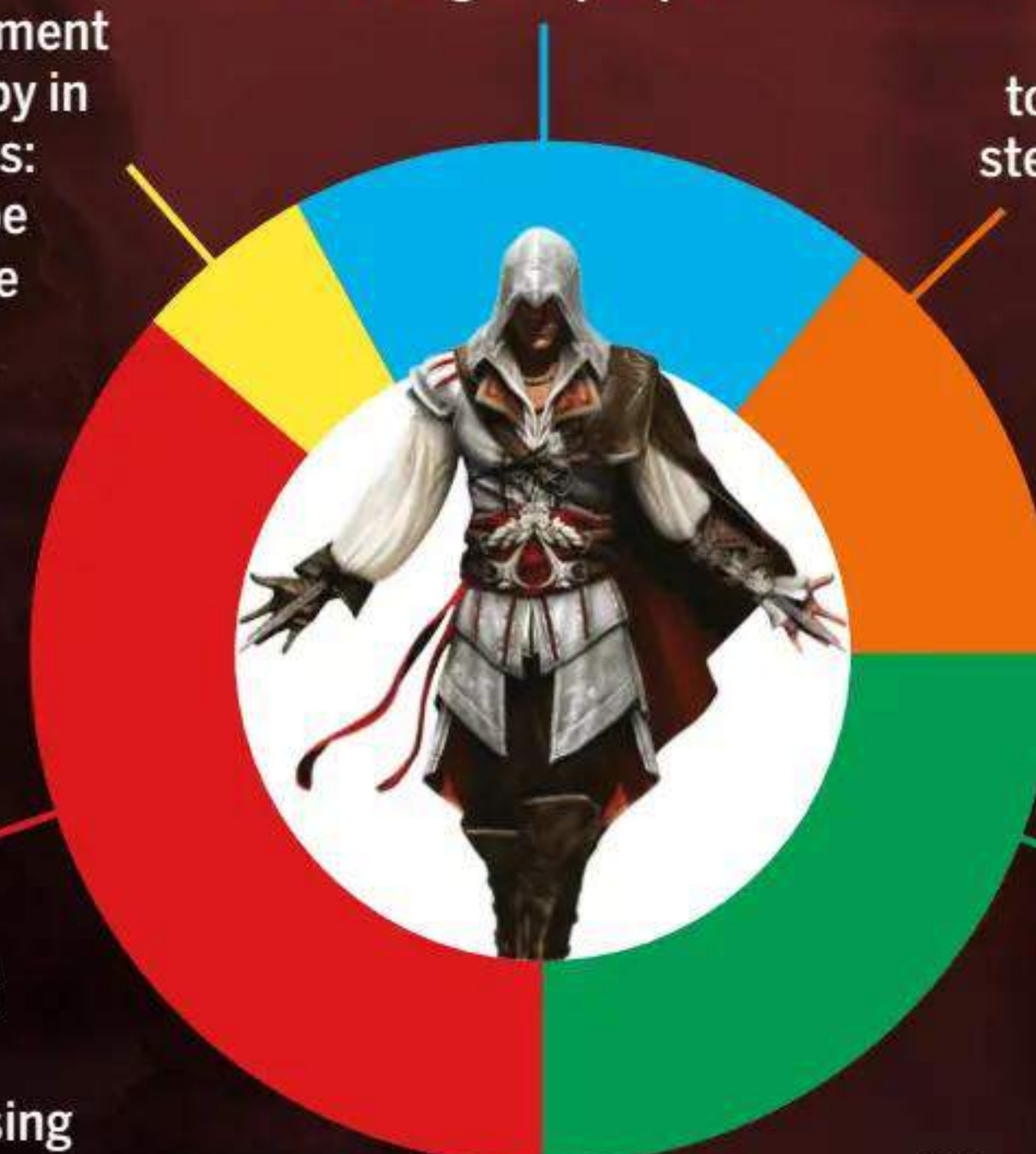
23% FREERUNNING
To the consternation and amazement of passersby in early games: "He must be late and she must be beautiful."

20% KILLING POWERFUL PEOPLE
Or regular people.

20% HIDING IN HAYSTACKS
Avoid detection in these top-of-the-line stealth devices.

30% CHASING VISTAS
Synchronising the next viewpoint.

15% BUYING CAPES
Don't let this filigreed get-up be wasted on you.





Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag 2013

The supreme pirate experience, *Black Flag* was assembled entirely around a diversion introduced in *Assassin's Creed III*: naval battles and a ship to captain through them. The heart of the game lay onboard the Jackdaw, a sleek and scrappy vessel which players used to exert piratical terror on the West Indies of the early 1700s. Finally, here were vital new mechanics which placed *Black Flag* at the zenith of swashbuckling exploration games.

The Jackdaw is the nautical extension of protagonist Edward Kenway, grandfather of *III*'s Connor. Wearing the garb of an Assassin he kills in a Cuban cove, Kenway is a reluctant hero in facing a Templar conspiracy to deploy an ancient relic, but an archetypal pirate. He prowls island paradises, cracks treasure maps and ascends Spanish Colonial churches. It's at sea where *Black Flag* shines – and the sea that established it as a critical and commercial hit.



Assassin's Creed Rogue 2014, PC 2015

Of all the mainline games, *Rogue* is the slightest, sandwiched between the events of *Black Flag* on the one hand and *III* and *Unity* on the other. It presents Irish American Shay Cormac as an Assassin turned Templar. Tortured by guilt over the former's consequentialist ethics, seen

first-hand when Shay triggers the catastrophic 1755 Lisbon earthquake while on assignment, he sets out to hunt down Assassins in pre-Revolution New York and the North Atlantic's vistas of snow and water. The final act of the American trilogy, developed by Ubisoft Sofia, aimed to deliver more of what made *Black Flag* good, and did just that.



Assassin's Creed Unity 2014

Armed with rebuilt technology, *Unity* took players to Paris in 1789. Where better to showcase its tricks than a city of slums and appointed palaces at the forefront of modernity, riven by revolutionary chaos? This diorama is more fully realised than any before it, where a swathe of the city's buildings can be entered and whose alleys teem with Parisians, doused in smoke and shot through by stunning light. Among them stalked a new hidden blade: Arno, a debonair noble reminiscent of Ezio. *Unity* wasn't all art and engineering. It featured co-op missions, a series-first skill tree and ambitious equipment customisation. Yet its attempt to mix-up the stealth system proved divisive, and though parkour looked better, in practice it often felt prescribed.

The Assassin's Creed Saga



Assassin's Creed Syndicate

2015

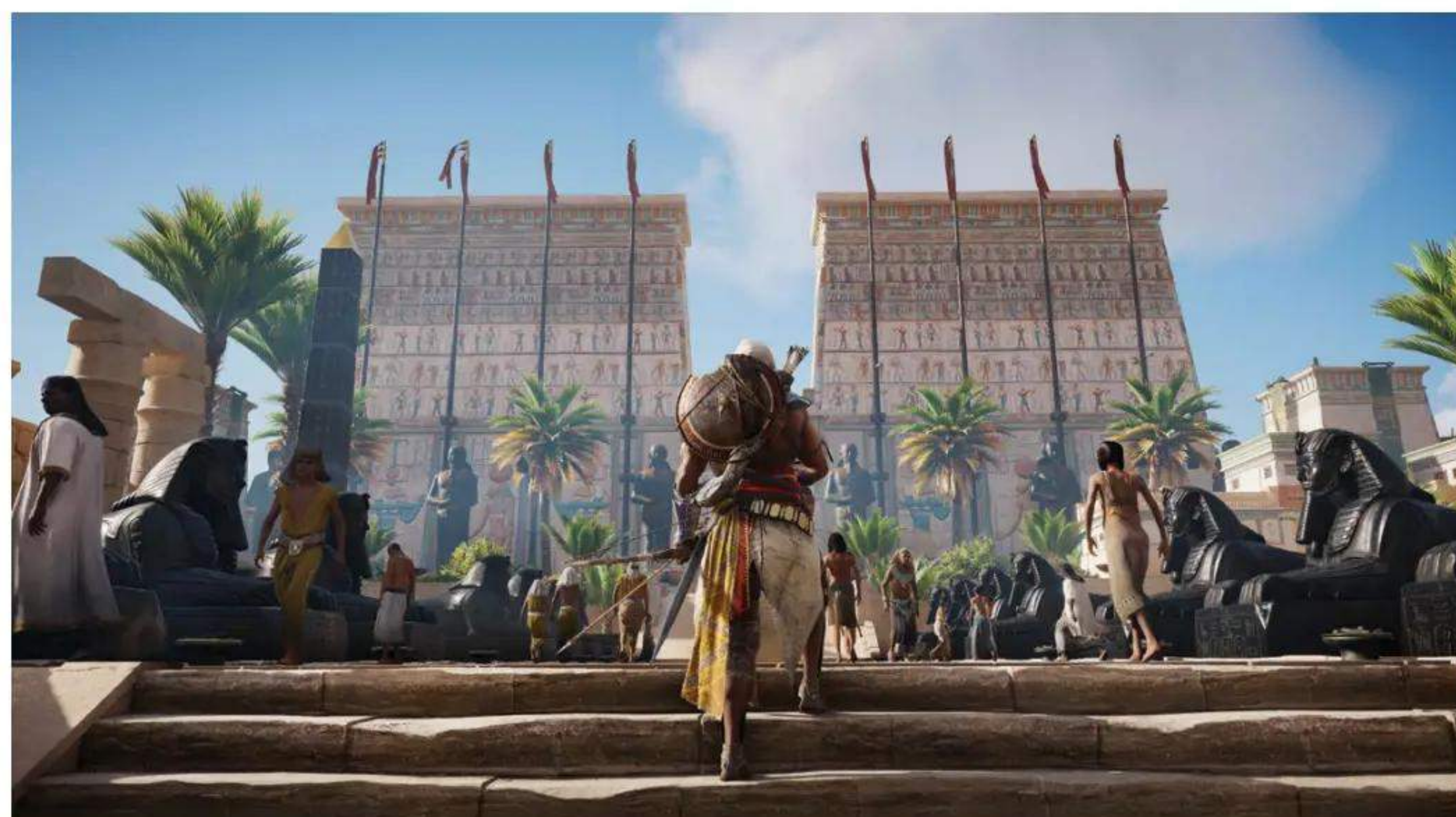
Syndicate had the poor luck of following in *Unity*'s glitchy wake, with the result of disappointing sales for Ubisoft Quebec's first mainline *Assassin's Creed* game which otherwise put an original spin on the franchise. The clock moved onwards a half-century to Victorian London. Its depiction of contrasts, of poverty, excess, vice and vitality, helped make the furnace of the modern world fathomable. Players switched between twins Jacob and Evie Frye, each harnessing different playstyles. The setting was leveraged for new gadgets including a fantastical steampunk zipline launcher which created new routes across the smoggy London skyline.

Assassin's Creed Origins 2017

Before *Origins*, no *Assassin's Creed* had ever achieved a single contiguous open world yoking multiple cities and rural environments together, nor any one environment of such scale. *Origins* was four years in the making, which helped Ubisoft pivot the series towards one embracing elements of RPGs: extensive skill trees, quest lines, experience points, and innumerable diversions. Even the act of swinging a sword changed, with the routine of animations transformed into a hitbox system.

Ancient Egypt in the time of Cleopatra was *Origins*' setting, and it delivered. Its astonishingly realised ancient structures include Giza's Great Pyramid, capped by its gold pyramidion, the Library of Alexandria, stuffed with scribes and scrolls, and the Temple at Memphis, embellished with authentic religious rites.

Through the genetic memories of rogue Abstergo researcher Layla Hassan, we play as a vengeful Bayek and occasionally his wife Aya, originally intended as the ultimate protagonist. A new companion: an eagle named Senu, is used to scout an area and highlight enemies much like a drone in *Ghost Recon*. This ensured stealth survived, but the armoury at your disposal meant it was diminished in practice. *Origins*' genre-blending alchemy resulted in a massive, immersive adventure.



Assassin's Creed Odyssey 2018

Odysey would resemble a veneer over *Origins* if not for the *Adrestia*, the Greek battleship that made the Aegean Sea your hunting ground. *Odysey* wired the naval combat, management and exploration of *Black Flag* into its world and placed at your side your new mate Herodotus – a classicist's dream.

As Spartan mercenary Kassandra (although you could also play as her brother Alexios), we set out on a quest tinged with Sophoclean trim to avenge our murdered father, caught in the feud with Athens that was the Peloponnesian War. It's an excuse to travel the vast map, which is too vast really, and its stunning islands and characters alluding to all manner of myths and legends.

In other ways *Odysey* saw the franchise's transformation complete. *Origins* had hardly been without irrelevant side-activities, but *Odysey* went beyond itself to scatter ever more bloat in the player's path. The result were save games that reached into eyebrow-raising runtimes without ever really approaching completion. But among its more successful diversions were side missions which have you hunt down the baddies of the Cult of Kosmos, pursuing clues and procedurally terminating them until eventually their kingpin is revealed.

To that end, *Odysey* also introduced an excellent way of cheesing it: the Spartan Kick, copy-pasted straight out of 300, which lets you wham even the mightiest opponents from *Odysey*'s magnificent cliffs to their doom.



Assassin's Creed Valhalla 2020

By *Valhalla*, the series had transformed from one ostensibly about secret agents to one about excessively armed warriors staving people's faces in. *Valhalla* covers huge territory, starting in Scandinavia and proceeding to early medieval England – and in DLCs, Ireland and France, too. These landscapes are crammed with detail, spontaneous events, defended camps and ancient ruins.

The game proper begins when we arrive in England on our own Viking longship, as pragmatic and worldly raider Eivor Varinsdottir establishes the settlement of Ravenholme. In securing the colony we banter with allies, depose leaders and fight chaotic sieges. Combat takes its most gratuitous form yet: the camera is closer, the weapons meatier and multifarious. Eivor is an unstoppable force, whose abilities include a move which lets her Rush and Bash enemies into brick walls. Having said

that, stealth is a viable route and sometimes essential. We have a raven, and instinct-led investigations form the basis of many quests.

Unlocking passive skills and active abilities is managed by finding books, recoverable in monasteries. With increased power, it's possible to venture further into regions where more vulnerable monasteries lie. *Valhalla* is greatly entertaining. You meet Basim, whose journey into the Brotherhood is told in *Assassin's Creed Mirage*.

UNLOCKING PASSIVE SKILLS AND ACTIVE ABILITIES IS MANAGED BY FINDING BOOKS

EXPLORE MORE

Other worthwhile Assassin's Creed adventures on PC

ASSASSIN'S CREED FREEDOM CRY 2013

Originally DLC for *Black Flag*, *Freedom Cry* saw Adéwalé aid a rebellion striking back against slavers in Port-au-Prince.

ASSASSIN'S CREED LIBERATION 2014

Liberation first appeared as a PS Vita exclusive before bringing the series' first female protagonist to PC.

DISCOVERY TOUR: ANCIENT EGYPT 2018

Ubisoft's walking tours of famous landmarks worked just as well at giving combat-averse players access to the game lore.

DISCOVERY TOUR: VIKING AGE 2021

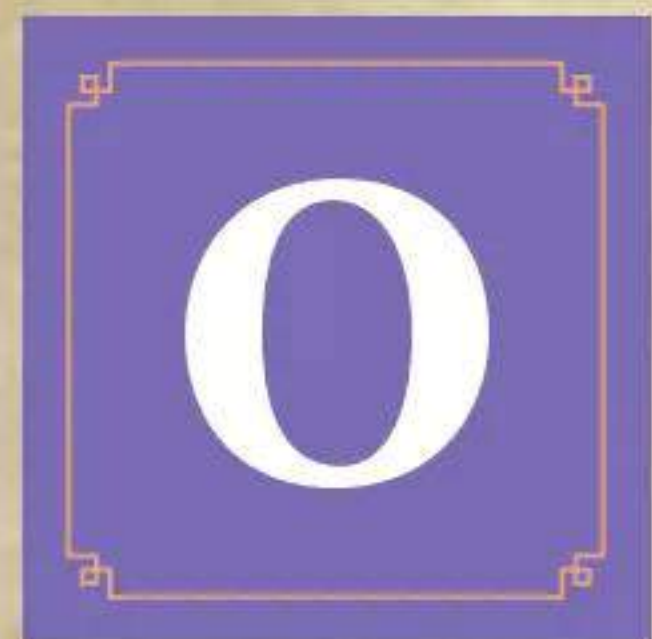
The latest *Discovery Tour* opens up medieval England and Norway for curated tours of history and culture.



READ 'EM AND WEEP

One Dragonborn's epic quest
to become **BALDUR'S GATE III's**
foremost librarian

By Emma Withington



Obsidian's day wasn't going well. Barely escaping a Nautiloid after becoming infected with a Mind Flayer parasite was one thing. Being interrupted in her singular mission to build Faerûn's greatest ever library in Baldur's Gate? Devastating. She possesses power and wit, but this Dragonborn sorcerer didn't sign up for a hero's quest.

I am a filthy hoarder, in and out of videogames. Encumbered is my middle name. If a game has collectable books, I'm doomed. So, I decided to channel this obsession for Obsidian's journey. The goal? To amass a book collection that rivals Sorcerous Sundries and open a library in Baldur's Gate. AKA dump a lot of books in a vacant, preferably free, plot.

I would describe Obsidian as a blend of The Mummy's Evelyn O'Connell and *Final Fantasy XIV*'s Emet-Selch. Headstrong, curious to a fault, charismatic and powerful – but if you turn around for support she might have dissipated into a deep disapproving sigh. She takes librarianship very seriously, so I would strongly advise against standing between her and a coveted tome, lest you take a Magic Missile to the face. If you thought the librarian

in Ghostbusters was frightening, she's got nothing on the hushing power of Obsidian's glare.

Obsidian is not alone on this journey. Her fellow captive, Warren, is a heroic Githyanki monk who could be her ticket back to the city without having to get her hands dirty. Warren is an unusual Gith, aside from the signature blunt honesty. She is calm and practical, with a penchant for 'breezy sandals'. Thankfully, Warren was moved by Obsidian's passion for her library project and vowed to assist her on this holy mission. While finding a cure. Eventually.

THE RULES

1. Do whatever it takes to procure books.
2. Avoid heroics, unless books are involved.
3. Use conversational wizardry and make low-stakes choices to stay out of trouble.

CRASH COURSE

In a tale as old as time, Obsidian and Warren began their journey on the Nautiloid – infected and irritated. You know the drill. We weren't alone on the cephalopod of doom, as we soon encountered another Githyanki, Lae'zel.

The Githgals got along like a house on fire, making plans and throwing hands, but I paid little attention. My literary predicament spun around and around in my mind like a carousel, and I wanted to get off.

While looking for an escape route, Warren insisted upon freeing a half-elf named Shadowheart, who was contained in one of the eldritch pods. Thankfully this proved to be mere child's play for Obsidian, opening the pod without needing to overexert herself beyond a hand wave or two. She supposed the more allies

the better, especially if she was to achieve her goal.

After giving the nautiloid a crash course in Beach, I scoured the area for any signs of Obsidian's favourite thing: silent entities with spines that occasionally crack. Books of course. Obsidian's first find was less erudite and more crude, as she picked up Shanties for the Bitch Queen on a pier nearby. Spicy. With a raised eyebrow, she stowed it away for later. "The way some people honour their Gods," Obsidian thought. Aside from this literary gem, biohazard beach was fairly sparse on the book front and instead became a veritable companion collectathon.

Warren took responsibility for keeping a man known as Astarion in check, shortly after he'd held Obsidian at knife-point. All a "misunderstanding" he'd said, but he wasn't my concern. Mere moments later, we came across a hand emerging from a portal, along with an authoritative voice calling for help. Warren couldn't help herself and gave the hand a good slap,

BELOW: A devil I would. Uh, sorry what was the question?



Raphael: A devil you do.



before eventually pulling the wizard out of the swirling purple mass. The scent of old books, fresh ink upon parchment, and faint vestiges of unknown magic washed over her. He had the aroma of a library, ascending Obsidian to biblio-heaven. But, she promptly returned to reality

once he spoke. There's no love lost between wizards and sorcerers, but maybe, if they could both get past their innate arrogance, a fruitful partnership would form. For better or worse, if anyone can help her track down the books she needs, it would be Gale.

ABOVE: It's tough to top *The Illustrated Adventures of Balduran*. An exceptionally crude retelling of Balduran's adventures that teaches us the most valuable lesson, "Never underestimate the power of a turnip".

MUMMY RETURNS

Obsidian and Gale began bickering on the approach to a dilapidated crypt, while crouching by some pillars to avoid detection by the bandits in the area. "You're not versed in magic are you?" said Gale, in a condescending tone. "Of course I am!" Obsidian retorted, just because a sorcerer isn't traditionally "studied in magic" doesn't mean she's ignorant.

Suddenly, dice started rolling outside the crypt, as Warren had failed to charm the bandits I had planned to avoid – until 'patronising Pat' over here started grinding my gears. Once they had been swiftly dealt with, thanks in part to Obsidian's determination to showcase her magical prowess, we examined the area. I found a book on one of the bandits, Queleenna, called *Talis: Divination without Magic*. It looked like her lover had been trying to express her feelings via *Talis* card readings. Communicating that would be... challenging now.

To get into the crypt, I considered the unstable masonry by the nearby

HOLMES AND WATSON

This dynamic duo is on the book-case

OBSIDIAN

Race: Silver Dragonborn, born of ice and fire.

Class and subclass: Sorcerer – Draconic Bloodline.

Background: Sage.

Top proficiency: Charisma – to talk her way out of trouble.

Fun fact: Don't tell her not to touch something, because she will.



WARREN

Race: Githyanki, not related to Shrek.

Class and subclass: Monk – Way of the Open Hand.

Background: Guild Artisan – she's curious about the people of Faerûn.

Top proficiency: Dexterity – to throw hands with finesse.

Fun fact: If it's in front of her, then the universe wants her to have it.





» shrine to be a safer entrance than the front door. Not exactly. Obsidian's frustration boiled over as a second group began to attack – she could just about discern the shapes of books in the distance and her hunger was insatiable. The gang had conveniently gathered around a flammable barrel – her time had come. In one prodigious explosion the bandits were wiped out and she could finally get back to book hunting.

The Refectory library contained the kind of books you might expect – covering death and religion in all its grim glory. Someone must have been preoccupied with vampires, as there were several copies of *Curse of the Vampyr* in this room alone. Obsidian looked up for a moment as she observed Astarion scurrying about – noting in particular his deftness, charm and cold beauty which match the book's description of a vampire. Probably nothing to worry about. As I bagged more books, *Death and Divinity: A Godly Guide* held my interest – particularly the tale of Jergal. Armed with a title worthy of

ABOVE: To acquire *Traveller's Guide to the Sword Coast: Vol IX*, Obsidian might've, accidentally, got Warren arrested by grabbing it and bolting from the scene – leaving her as the only suspect.

Douglas Adams' prose, *The Lord of the End of Everything*, Jergal used the ambitions of Bane, Bhaal and Myrkul to free himself from his duty as the God of Death. When we stepped out into the main area of the crypt, we spotted some skeletal scribes and warriors scattered about.

Odd. Warren wondered if we could bring them peace by moving them elsewhere. She rather ungracefully punted a skeleton across the room, in order to begin the process of relocation, and they sprang to life along with all their friends. I reckon they had a bone to pick with us. Once

THE BOOK THIEF

A day in the life of a librarian in Faerûn

30% QUESTIONING
Silver-tongued logic and reasoning prevails. Most of the time.

35% CATALOGUING
With more than 75 unique books collected so far, it's time she learned the Dewey Decimal system.



20% HIDING BEHIND WARREN
During any conflict, Warren was the preferred human.

10% IN JAIL
Obsidian's thirst for knowledge is unstoppable, except when it isn't.

5% ARGUING WITH GALE
His conversational skills could power a hot air balloon.

OBSIDIAN CHANNELLED HER POWER INTO THE ARCANE LOCK AND IT SOON FELL OPEN



balance was restored in a flurry of well-placed punches and sorcery, Gale observed that the shrine here was dedicated to Jergal. If the books are anything to go by, this place must be truly ancient.

We discovered a hidden switch to the left of the shrine, uncovering the entrance to a tomb. A lot of effort had been made to conceal the sarcophagus within and, against her better judgement, Obsidian reached out and touched it. Levitating effortlessly out of it with the poise and grace of a magical girl was a mummified man – adorned in ornate gold detailing around his body and donned in surprisingly well preserved robes. He asked Obsidian, “What is the worth of a single mortal life?” This sounded familiar. A recent book she’d found, *On Death and Resurrection*, ponders the very same question and discusses how a person’s deeds influence their soul’s value. Obsidian said this and he scoffed about that being “what he expects I believe” – well, no, that’s what the book told me, thank you

BELOW: Hey Gale, whatcha readin’?



very much. He said he’d see us again “when the time was right” (which was about 20 minutes later back at camp) and wandered off around the crypt, muttering to himself. I followed his ramblings into a side room and found a magically sealed tome – *The Book of Dead Gods*. Obsidian channelled her power into the arcane lock and it soon fell open. It contained a list of gods “once lost, but now restored after the Second Sundering”. Three of them are close together, but have been so aggressively scratched out on the page that the names are illegible. A *Ray of Enfeeblement* scroll also dropped out of the book, which Obsidian pocketed for Gale. He can have it, if he behaves.

MOSTLY HARMLESS

The more we learned of the parasite, Obsidian realised she was on borrowed time. So upon reaching the Emerald Grove she decided she must grab as many books as possible – damn the consequences. Most of the occupants of the Grove were tiefling refugees and druids, providing a rich tapestry of books to acquire. In an effort that would put contestants of *Supermarket Sweep* to shame, books were soon flying off of tables and out of tents. Obsidian hoped the guards wouldn’t take offence, it’s for the good of the people after all, surely anyone can see that?

Her charisma enabled her to pilfer a large number of books and get away with it, weaving tales of destiny and how there were bigger fish to fry. She was unstoppable, a veritable force of

book-based nature. Clink! Shit. Mortified, Obsidian had been arrested for picking up *The Realm According to Bumpo*. This is not a good book. After breaking out of prison and dancing around some exploding fungi, Obsidian reluctantly retrieved the book from the evidence chest in shame. This had to be Faerûn’s dumbest crime.

Once we’d composed ourselves, and Warren had stopped berating Obsidian for her lack of patience, I made sure to speak to the wizard, Rolan. This handsome yet arrogant tiefling offered Obsidian and Gale an introduction to the renowned wizard Lorroakan of *Sorcerous Sundries* in Baldur’s Gate. While his reputation in the city is somewhat dubious, Obsidian desperately wanted to get a peek at his private book collection. One way or another.

While exploring the Grove I’d decided that Obsidian and children generally don’t mix, she is overprotective of her books and these little terrors would simply ruin them with their grubby hands. Best to stay as far away as possible. To her dismay, Warren did the opposite. We stumbled across the alluring song of a harpy, not far from the Grove – Obsidian warned Warren of the danger, but she’d seen a child down by the beach and absolutely had to intervene. Reluctantly, Gale and I took position above the scene, as the harpies became hostile. A result of attempting to rescue their lunch.

Once dealt with, the small one – Mirkon – told us of his hideout and that we should stop by. Mol would be >>

Baldur's Gate III

» pleased, apparently? This felt like precious time away from book hunting, but Obsidian followed – flicking through the *The Illustrated Adventures of Balduran* along the way. Allegedly a children's book, it states there is absolutely NOTHING small about Balduran. Nuh uh. Not at all, no sir. Well, it's not like we can challenge that statement, is it?

We arrived at the hideout via a small fissure in the cavern wall – just wide enough for Obsidian and her bulging pack of books to get through. Warren spoke to the younglings and, as thanks for saving him, Mirkon presented her with a short story he had written about his saviour. I couldn't help but be touched by an attempt to create literature, crude as it is – not to mention omitting the fact that Warren wasn't alone in this 'daring rescue'. Ahem.

FOOL'S ERRAND

In the Druid Grove we met the famous author Volo. The Bard asked Obsidian for an account of the skirmish we fought through to gain entry to the Grove, and she recalled the event with conscientious accuracy, but instead he noted down ridiculous fabrications such as goblins with magic blowguns and the presence of red dragons! After reading the draft of Volo's Not-so-Complete Guide to the Behaviour of Nymphs it didn't surprise me that he was prone to exaggeration. But this conversation took the biscuit.

In the council chamber, Warren was attempting to peacefully deal with the Grove leaders and save a

young tiefling named Arabella from Kagha – a severe woman exuding Dwight-level desperation to become Grove manager. Meanwhile, I took this opportunity to pore over the books in the servant's quarters nearby. While avoiding the intimidating guard-wolf Silver, Obsidian came across *Extracts – The Rule of Three*, a popular part of a wider series of books that provide a beginner's guide to Alchemy. Better yet, this was a 50th anniversary edition! I wonder if it comes with a special sleeve? Even though Obsidian hadn't previously taken an interest in alchemy, this piqued her interest. It included notes from renowned alchemist Haskinn Xhesilaphin, a Dragonborn who had been descaled in his youth, and how this fuelled his alchemical discoveries.

Warren frequently reminded Obsidian that being rid of the tadpole should probably be a bit higher up the priority list. Seeing as there were more literary opportunities in the vicinity, Obsidian relented and agreed to meet with Nettie who had come recommended as a healer. There were more books of interest in Nettie's abode including *Oral Histories of Faerûn: The Spellplague* and, to Obsidian's excitement, part two of the *Extract* series *On Antidotes*. Warren helpfully picked this up to show her – waving in her direction as Obsidian simultaneously grabbed *The Spellplague*.

Allegedly intending to help, Nettie took us into the Enclave Library. Obsidian was struggling to restrain herself, as she glanced at the



BELOW: You what mate?

tantalising shelves. While speaking to Nettie, a stone slab ground shut behind us leaving no visible way out. The halfling proceeded to ask far too many questions, while brandishing a sharp stick. After misleading us down the garden path and back again, it turns out she had no cure, only "a way out". Sorry love, but it's a no from me. Obsidian can't entertain the thought of taking this poison while her library remains incomplete. Nettie's fate was sealed. Soon enough the books were once again in her possession and the great library raid could begin. Once we'd cleaned house, Nettie's circlet (Key of the Ancients) allowed us to quietly leave out the back way. No questions asked.

DEVIL'S DETAILS

On the road to the Blighted Village, a man appeared out of thin air in sparks. After waxing poetic and practically auditioning to be a storyteller at Obsidian's future library, he introduced himself as Raphael.

Obsidian was unsure if she felt threatened or propositioned or both,



Gale: Oh, I do apologise. I meant to ask: are you *studied* in magic. Namely: are you a wizard? Which you are not.



ALLEGEDLY INTENDING TO HELP, NETTIE TOOK US INTO THE ENCLAVE LIBRARY

but she was uncharacteristically overcome with desire for something other than books. With a snap of his fingers, Raphael whisked Obsidian and Gale to his base of operations – the House of Hope. Her library senses were tingling as she took in the banquet hall’s opulence and faced

Raphael by a grand fireplace – the perfect book-reading spot. All rational thought left the building, as she became lost in library-based desire and attempted to navigate the conversation with the dandy.

Revealing himself to be a cambion, a devil, Raphael eloquently made his

ABOVE: Obsidian has collected over 75 unique books so far. Throughout her journey, she’s been brought in for questioning at least four times and arrested once (but we don’t talk about that).

case to strike a deal. Apparently he can solve our collective tadpole issue with ease, but after reading *Soul Coins: A Treatise*, Obsidian didn’t fancy her soul becoming devilish currency. However, if she was to get access to the House of Hope again, she’d need to play along. For now, Gale mused that to capture Raphael’s attention must mean he wants something. Badly. Problem is, so do I: the devil’s book collection, and also his house. Obsidian averted Warren’s questioning gaze as she burst back into existence on the dirt path, dismissing her disappearance as “complicated sorcerer things”.

After a failed attempt at sneaking into the Blighted Village and a lovely chat with the surprisingly articulate orc Lump, I yelled in pained dismay and profanity. Warren came running to see what was wrong. Something was very wrong indeed – Obsidian had found another copy of *The Realm According to Bumpo*. Becoming a librarian in Faerûn is full of trials and tribulations, with none as trying as maintaining one’s dignity. ■

TOME TRAVEL

Curiosities from Obsidian’s cabinet



SPOOKY MEMOIRS

The Dank Crypt houses fascinating books pertaining to life, death, Religion, and teases the Dead Three. The Book of Final Breath relates to the everyman. It’s a never-ending book of people’s dying words. Grim, but good value for money, this memoir teases the imagination.



LEGO ADVENTURES

Journey through the Jungle includes an extremely obscure reference for Lego fans. If the protagonist’s name Baron von Barron rings any bells, the minifigure villain of the same name (aka Sam Sinister) debuted in the 1990s Lego Adventures, Egypt range.



FAERÛN’S FABLES

Fables of Faerûn consists of five volumes. The Boy and the Beholder is the most familiar, as a spin on the Boy Who Cried Wolf. The trickiest to find is The Dimwitted Drow – in which seeking out the Mind Flayers’ Lovecraftian library, rather than just studying a bit more, is a bad idea actually.



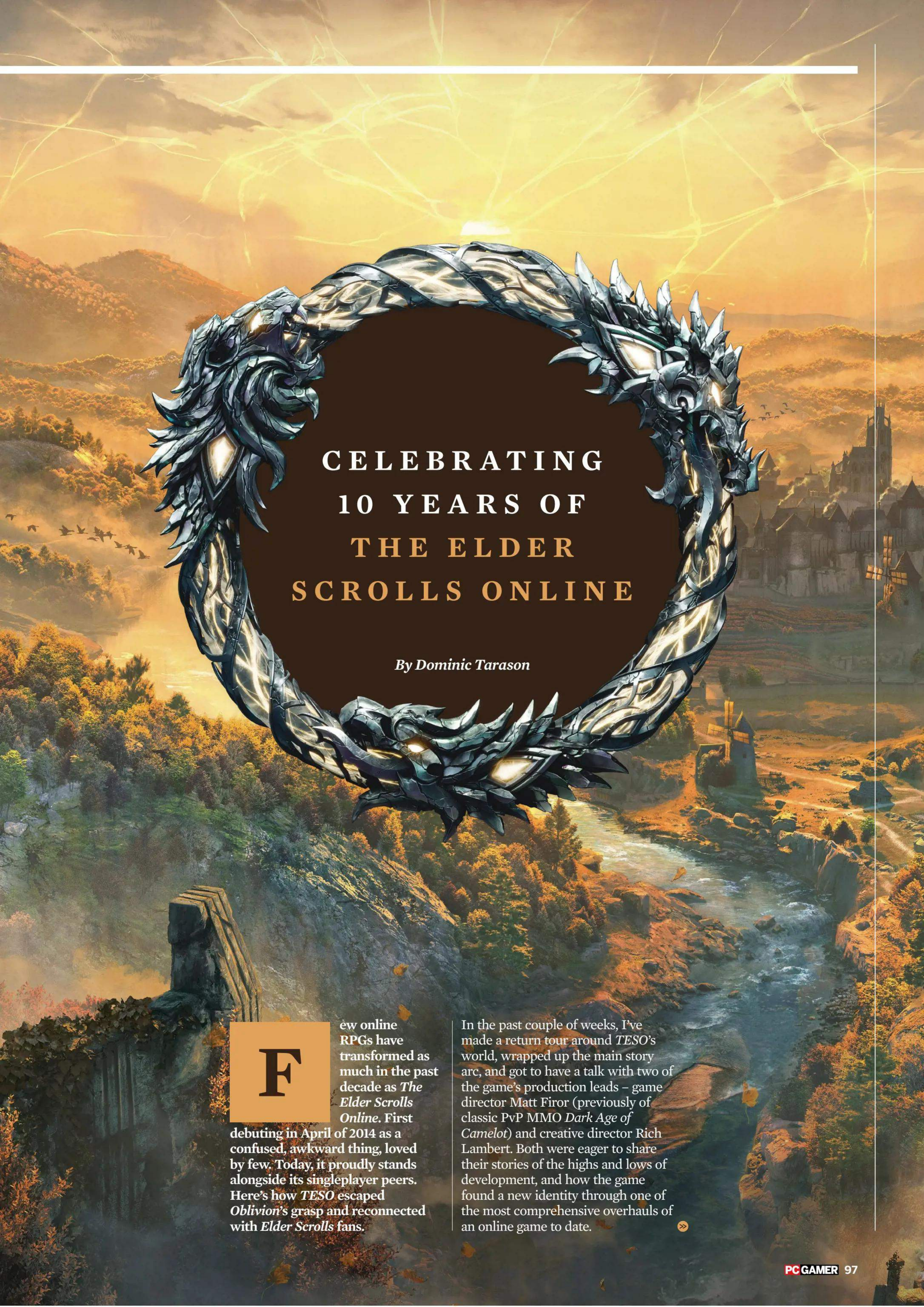
VOX POPULI

The Oral Histories of Faerûn series chronicles life in the realm. From a wood-elf’s poem on Gith and Mind Flayers, to an interview with a Paladin Oathbreaker, we’re given a fresh perspective. The Spellplague is a prime example of how we can be all affected by the same event, in very different ways.

FEATURE

The Elder Scrolls Online





CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

By Dominic Tarason

F

ew online RPGs have transformed as much in the past decade as *The Elder Scrolls Online*. First debuting in April of 2014 as a confused, awkward thing, loved by few. Today, it proudly stands alongside its singleplayer peers. Here's how *TESO* escaped *Oblivion*'s grasp and reconnected with *Elder Scrolls* fans.

In the past couple of weeks, I've made a return tour around *TESO*'s world, wrapped up the main story arc, and got to have a talk with two of the game's production leads – game director Matt Firor (previously of classic PvP MMO *Dark Age of Camelot*) and creative director Rich Lambert. Both were eager to share their stories of the highs and lows of development, and how the game found a new identity through one of the most comprehensive overhauls of an online game to date. >>

The Elder Scrolls Online

» *TESO's* story begins 17 years ago, an eternity by videogame standards. *Oblivion* was only 18 months old, and *Fallout 3* was an up-and-coming hit. "Our North Star at the time was *Oblivion*," reminisces Firor. "The very first version of ESO we worked on – for the first two or three years – was very much a mid-2000s MMO with *Oblivion's* IP. And then *Skyrim* launched, and everything changed."

This prompted a fundamental redesign of the game, including massive systems and visual overhauls, according to Matt. "*Skyrim* was like a social phenomenon, and we knew that our original concept just wouldn't fly in a post-*Skyrim* world. We were the next *Elder Scrolls* game to launch, so we had to make the game more *Skyrim*-like and we only had like a year and a half to do it."

Among the features that had to be rushed into place were a first-person mode, *Skyrim*-ish combat (free of the tab-targeting of older online games), and fully voiced dialogue for all the game's NPCs in multiple languages, a directive that was hard to break to their localisation producer, according to Lambert. It was a valiant effort, but Firor sums up the release version's primary issue, "It wasn't *Elder Scrolls* enough."

Probably the least *Elder Scrolls* thing about the game was that it had traditional level-based progression. You chased sources of XP and levelled and gradually unlocked more areas. Players would be fighting over objectives required for progression, as everyone was stuck on the same track. It had some of that *Elder Scrolls* aesthetic, but it felt like an early 2000s MMO in bad *Skyrim* cosplay. Players were getting bored and turning to other online games. The next two and a half years of the game's development were then dedicated to completing *TESO's* transformation into a 'true' *Elder Scrolls* game.

ALL FOR ONE

One of the first big signs of *TESO's* course-correction came on March 17, 2015. The game previously ran on a traditional retail-and-subscription business model, which was becoming increasingly unpopular at the time. Now you could play the game whenever so long as you'd just bought a copy, with the subscription now offering a variety of perks, including a separate (bottomless) inventory for crafting gubbins, and access to the many minor bits of DLC as they were released.

The big change – the *One Tamriel* update – launched in October of 2016, and was the turning point for the game. It did the seemingly unthinkable and patched out level-based progression. Mostly. You still gained skill points from experience and unlocked new features at specific break-points, but the world was no longer a level-segregated space, and quests had most of their requirements stripped.

On paper it sounds like a relatively minor thing, but in practice it completely changed the structure of the game, establishing a solid foundation that has brought in new players for years, and given the studio even more freedom to experiment in how it expands the game through major releases (like the recent *Necrom* expansion, and the soon-to-launch *Gold Road*), and through regular, smaller DLC.

DON'T CALL IT AN MMO

When I asked what sets *TESO* apart from other MMOs, the first thing both Firor and Lambert brought up is that they don't refer to *TESO* as an MMO, internally or otherwise. "That's freighted with a bunch of game systems that *TESO* doesn't have." Instead, they prefer to call it a sandbox virtual world, as opposed to traditional 'on rails' RPG design. It's a point that's hard to argue, as ever since the *One Tamriel*



THE PREMIUM SCROLLS

The Morrowind chapter is included too



SUMMERSET

Get embroiled in high-elf politics, but you're probably here to join the time-bending Psijic order.



ELSWEYR

Discover just how weird the khajiit really are, in their many feline forms. Also butt heads with a stream of dragons.



GREYMOOR

Visit Skyrim in the off-season, while the dragons are in Elsweyr. The weather seems to be turning people into zombies.



BLACKWOOD

A swampy region featuring portals to the Atoll of Immolation. Also the debut of Companions.



HIGH ISLE

Knightly drama abounds in this scenic Breton getaway, with only occasional volcanic activity.



NECROM

Set off on a fresh adventure after signing a employment contract with the Daedric demigod.





**EVEN
'ENDGAME'
CONTENT IS
AVAILABLE FROM
EARLY ON**

overhaul, the game has been very content to let each player blaze their own trail.

While obviously not the same kind of anarchic moddable sandbox as *Skyrim* or *Oblivion*, this still feels like an authentic *Elder Scrolls* game. Character creation comes with a variety of starting locations and quest threads, and you're free to tackle stories as you see fit, unconcerned about level. You can be a buff warrior and still become a top ranking member of the Mages' Guild, while moonlighting as a master thief and assassin for the Dark Brotherhood.

Amusingly, the only two things you can't be at the same time (without exploits) are a vampire and werewolf, making for one of the game's toughest choices.

Similarly, Firor also highlighted that *TESO* never refers to its expansions as such, as that's a bit of a loaded term, too. Unlike its peers, each new Chapter is intended to be a mostly self-contained experience that you can play in any order, or even start a completely new character in, further adding to that classic *Elder Scrolls* 'You see it? You can go there' feeling. While there are some



ongoing story arcs, almost everything is designed to be accessible to players of almost all levels. Even 'endgame' content is available from early on, with some higher-difficulty variants unlocking over time, but for the most part, *TESO* is a casual experience.

ADVENTURE ON DEMAND

"You don't have to grind through the nine years of content we've built," says Lambert, explaining just why the game is structured the way it is – more open and freeform than any other contemporary online world, MMO or otherwise. "The questing



LEFT: There's something oddly calming about exploring dungeons.

RIGHT: Hermaeus Mora, Prince of knowledge, oversized monacles and contract small-print.



TESO IS A
WORLD THAT
WANTS TO BE
EXPLORED

» and delves – the storytelling – are set up to be easier. But then you've got co-op dungeons, open-world group events, world bosses. Every zone is a pancake-stack of difficulty," Firor expounds.

It doesn't sound too much different from other online RPGs, but having dabbled in most of them at some point or other, *TESO* does stand out as being especially accessible. You're free to pick what storylines to follow, and won't be especially challenged while you're finding your bearings. Combat is simplistic, roughly mirroring *Skyrim* with a few

additional hotkeyed attacks, and death is easily avoided during regular questing, even more easily if you pick up one of the chatty Companions, NPC party members introduced in *Blackwood*, the fifth Chapter.

Not to say that the game doesn't eventually push back, but the difficulty is mostly relegated to event bosses, public (or four-player matchmade) dungeons, or 12-player 'trials', which are *TESO*'s take on raids, albeit designed for relatively casual play until you hit level 50 and unlock their punishing Veteran difficulty modes. Dungeons also



have optional hard variants, serving up short, sharp bursts of opt-in difficulty in an otherwise very easy game. *TESO* is a world that wants to be explored, and it won't hurt you unless you ask nicely.

THE NEWER SCROLLS

Being such an open game, I asked Firor and Lambert where they thought a completely new player – fresh to MMOs or even the *Elder Scrolls* series as a whole – should start. Both (unsurprisingly) recommend newcomers stick with the original story arc, seeing you



LEFT: When all you've got is a hammer, everyone looks like a nail.

RIGHT: Roaming bosses mean you might get in a fight you can't solo.





facing down the invading Daedric prince Molag Bal, while gently introducing the game's world, setting and mechanics. For experienced *Elder Scrolls* fans or returning players, they recommend *Orsinium*, an earlier DLC pack set in frozen orcish territory, as it's a strong example of how the studio has grown and learnt design lessons over the years.

"We are definitely smarter now than we were back then," Lambert remarks as he talks about *Orsinium*. "We found out we can actually make denser cities with a lot of verticality that we didn't know we could do back in the old days," adds Firor, their pride in the expansion clear. Clearly eager to talk about it, Lambert gushes, "*Orsinium* is one of my favourite stories. It's got some of my favourite content, like the Maelstrom Arena, which I love as a solo-type player."

Lambert's personal favourite slice of the game, narrative-wise, is surprisingly one of the minor DLC packs. "If you're an *Elder Scrolls* fan and you've played ESO for a while, my favourite storyline is Murkmire, a smaller DLC that we did back in 2017. It starts out very Indiana Jones, but ends up cosmically affecting the entire space-time continuum of Tamriel. Plus it's an Argonian zone, so it's kinda weird anyway."

BLANK CHEQUE

Over an hour of chatting with them, both men revealed themselves to be huge old-school *Elder Scrolls* fans, right back to the DOS originals, and they've had a great time writing fresh lore and stories in the setting. While there's some agreement on specific bits of lore that they can't expand on (including some mysteries that must never be revealed, like what exactly happened to the mechanist Dwemer), they're basically being handed a blank cheque to write whatever *Elder Scrolls* stories they please, even

bending the lore a bit to allow things like dragons to crop up in the *Elsweyr* Chapter, when they were (previously) canonically inactive.

GOLD ROAD

TESO's next year is going to be one of its most interesting. Deep lore scholars will probably find plenty to get their teeth into with the upcoming *Gold Road* Chapter, delving into high-elf territory, a part of the setting that has seldom been directly in the spotlight. Firor and Lambert also promised an absurd 15 months of anniversary celebration events, running all the way through this next major DLC release and the next, hinting that we might be in for a particularly long story arc here, running until next summer.

With player counts holding strong across PC and consoles and no end of new Chapters and DLCs in sight, it seems likely that *The Elder Scrolls Online* will still be around and kicking in another five or even ten years, proudly standing alongside other enduring legacy MMOs (yeah, I said it) like *Guild Wars 2*. When asked where they saw the game going over the next few years, Firor painted a picture of a game in a strong place, but ready to adapt if needs be.

"We're starting our second decade. We're super successful. We've made something that has been an important part of many people's lives. But if you look back at the 17 years since the studio was founded, we've never been shy about making changes. We've got a good thing going, and we're doing new Chapters every year, but if we ever see the need to change things and mix it up, maybe experiment with the new content model, we will."

Considering that the game has now generated two billion dollars for Zenimax, it would be madness for Bethesda to slaughter this golden goose, even if it started out as an ugly duckling. ■

LEVELLING UP

A breakdown of your average adventuring session



FAR RE

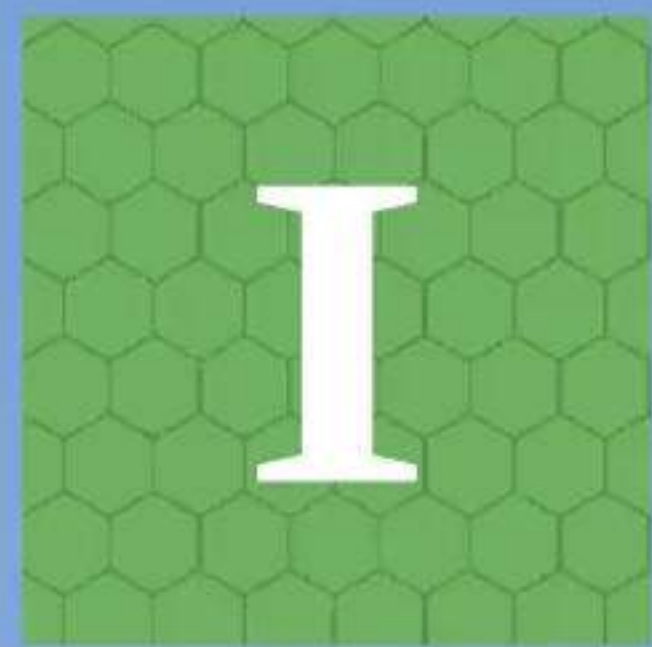
Twenty years ago,
FAR CRY changed
the landscape of
PC gaming forever.

By Rick Lane

ACHING



Far Cry



n 2004, the first-person shooter reached the zenith of its popularity. PC gamers worldwide were

buzzing with anticipated for two massive games. In the left corner was *Doom 3*, id Software's first entry in the series for a decade that looked set to deliver a revolution in graphics technology. In the right was *Half-Life 2*, the preposterously inventive sequel to what was generally considered the best shooter ever made. Already titans of the genre, both sequels promised cutting-edge visuals, new advances in FPS storytelling, innovations in physics and interactivity, and of course, mind-melting action.

But there was another shooter released that year, bearing no such pedigree, that you could argue was ultimately more influential than either of these games. Set across a lush archipelago of tropical islands, *Far Cry* blew a gaping hole in the FPS' corridor constraints, showing the world the sandbox potential in hitherto the most linear of genres. It spawned not one, but two of the most successful first-person shooter series of all time, and helped pave the way for the modern open world game as we know it. It may even have changed how games were made, ushering in an era of faster, more dynamic game development.

All that, and it was created by a team barely out of school with zero professional experience. "Our team had absolutely no clue how to make games," says Cevat Yerli, founder of



Crytek and *Far Cry*'s director. "And [I was] asking them to compete against the very best in the world."

CRY BABIES

Far Cry's story begins, fittingly, in the Maldives. In 1996, Yerli was visiting the island on holiday. "I was lying on the beach and it was boring. There was nothing else to do," he says. An

ABOVE: Jack Carver's personality is mostly contained in his shirt, but he does sling a few wonderfully dumb one liners.

FAR RIGHT: *Far Cry* has a smattering of interior levels, which is where the game is usually most difficult.

avid gamer and hobbyist programmer whose favourite game at the time was the *Quake* mod *Rocket Arena*, Yerli began to imagine the gaming opportunities afforded by an island. "I was inspired by the fact that there was a natural boundary to the world. It's not like a transparent wall saying, 'You can't walk beyond this,'" he says. "It opened up lots of opportunities for different types of gameplay that I hadn't seen before."

Yerli conceived of a game called *X-Isle*, where players would "shoot bad guys and save the princess" across a tropical archipelago of ten islands prowled by dinosaurs. "I was a big fan of Jurassic Park at the time", he explains. His imagined game wasn't singleplayer, but a mixture of PvP and PVE. "They would be fighting other players while there would be dinosaurs roaming around," Yerli explains. "A bit of the inspiration for *Hunt [Showdown]* at Crytek today comes very much from that PVE/PvP idea from *X-Isle*."

It would be convenient to say that Yerli flew back from the

THE FAR CRY SURVIVAL KIT

The best loadout for dealing with *Far Cry*'s enemies



AW50

Far Cry's Sniper Rifle is one of the best in its class. Essential for clearing out merc bases before you advance.



SILENCED MP5

The MP5 is the only real chance you have of killing enemies at close range without alerting their mates.



ROCKET LAUNCHER

Makes short work of the game's many helicopters, if you can find ammo for it.



OICW

A versatile late game weapon with a scope and grenade launcher that's crucial for dealing with TriGens.



Maldives and immediately founded Crytek to work on *X-Isle*. But its development was far more incremental than that. *X-Isle* was one of three game concepts Yerli experimented with over the next few years, working remotely across the internet with “50 to 55” other people. “It was an after-school thing. I would do my study and then I would tinker around and meet my friends online,” he says. “It was meant to be always just a hobby.”

Nonetheless, after a few years

signed a contract with the three brothers, which Yerli says was for “about \$70,000”.

Now understanding he could make games professionally, Yerli founded Crytek with his brothers. Its next project was an expanded *X-Isle* tech demo for Nvidia’s first programmable GPU – the GeForce 256. Yerli says that Crytek was only the second company in the world to receive a sample GPU for testing – behind only Microsoft. “We had, by the way, no clue what this was about,” Yerli says. “What was the difference between a GPU and a graphics card? What’s the point of it?” Crytek followed this up with another *X-Isle* demo, this one downloadable online as a benchmarking tool. “We had over ten million downloads,” Yerli says. “Crazy amounts even [by] today’s terms.”

It was this demo that attracted the attention of Ubisoft, who invited Yerli to Paris to discuss the idea of building a full game. “We drove by car for about ten hours, had a ten-hour long discussion with the CEO of Ubisoft, and signed the contract on the spot.” At this point in 2001, Yerli was 23 years old. “We had no idea those contracts take normally months to go back and

“WE HAD NO IDEA THOSE CONTRACTS TAKE MONTHS TO GO BACK AND FORTH”

they’d created a tech demo of *X-Isle*, which Yerli and his brothers, Avni and Faruk, began taking to trade shows. At E3 1999, they showed it to Nvidia. “They were shooting confetti bullets, and then those confetti bullets would hit a dinosaur and the dinosaur would look at you and walk away,” Yerli says. The tech demo impressed Nvidia so much that they



A model of an alien, designed before Crytek settled on mutants.



Far Cry

» forth,” he says. “Our ignorance helped us to be bold.”

CRY TECH

Now contracted to make a game, Crytek spent a “year in exploration” during which *X-Isle* gradually evolved into *Far Cry*. The shared-world multiplayer concept became a more traditional split between PvE singleplayer and PvP multiplayer. The virtual dinosaurs were made extinct, as Crytek experimented with other enemy types. “We had aliens in the game at some point,” Yerli says, an idea Crytek would return to in 2007’s *Crysis*. Ultimately, they settled on a mixture of regular human enemies and more powerful mutants. “Today, I’m still questioning whether it was the right [choice],” Yerli says. “At that time, it felt unique [compared] to other games, having mutants in there.”

Indeed, Yerli states that Crytek’s development philosophy was to do the opposite of what other shooters were doing at the time. “Instead of scripted, we want to be systemic,” he says. “[Instead of] dark, we wanted to be bright. Instead of corridors, we wanted to be open.”

All these things were facilitated by the game’s concept of being set on islands. But there was also a reason why shooters had limited themselves to corridors, it was what the 3D technology they were built on was designed to do. “The work we wanted to do was not possible with existing engines,” Yerli says. “It was as if we had to build the camera before we shoot the movie.” Some of this work had already been done to achieve the *X-Isle* demos. But turning that demo into a full game meant more than having good rendering tech. It meant having the right tools.

One of *Far Cry*’s most crucial tools was born out directly out of the team’s lack of experience. “We had no clue how to build levels, the old way or the new way,” Yerli says.

What Yerli did know, however, was that he found the process of iterating upon levels frustrating. Historically, making any changes to a game during development meant compiling a new build to test those alterations, a process that could take hours or in extreme cases days. For Crytek figuring out how to design an open-ended shooter as its debut game meant a lot of testing.

“We thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if you could actually build the game as you tested it in real time?’” Yerli says. “I want to move a tree and then jump in the game and try it out immediately.” The notion was contested by Crytek’s engineers as unrealistic and unnecessary. “They came to me and said, ‘We don’t

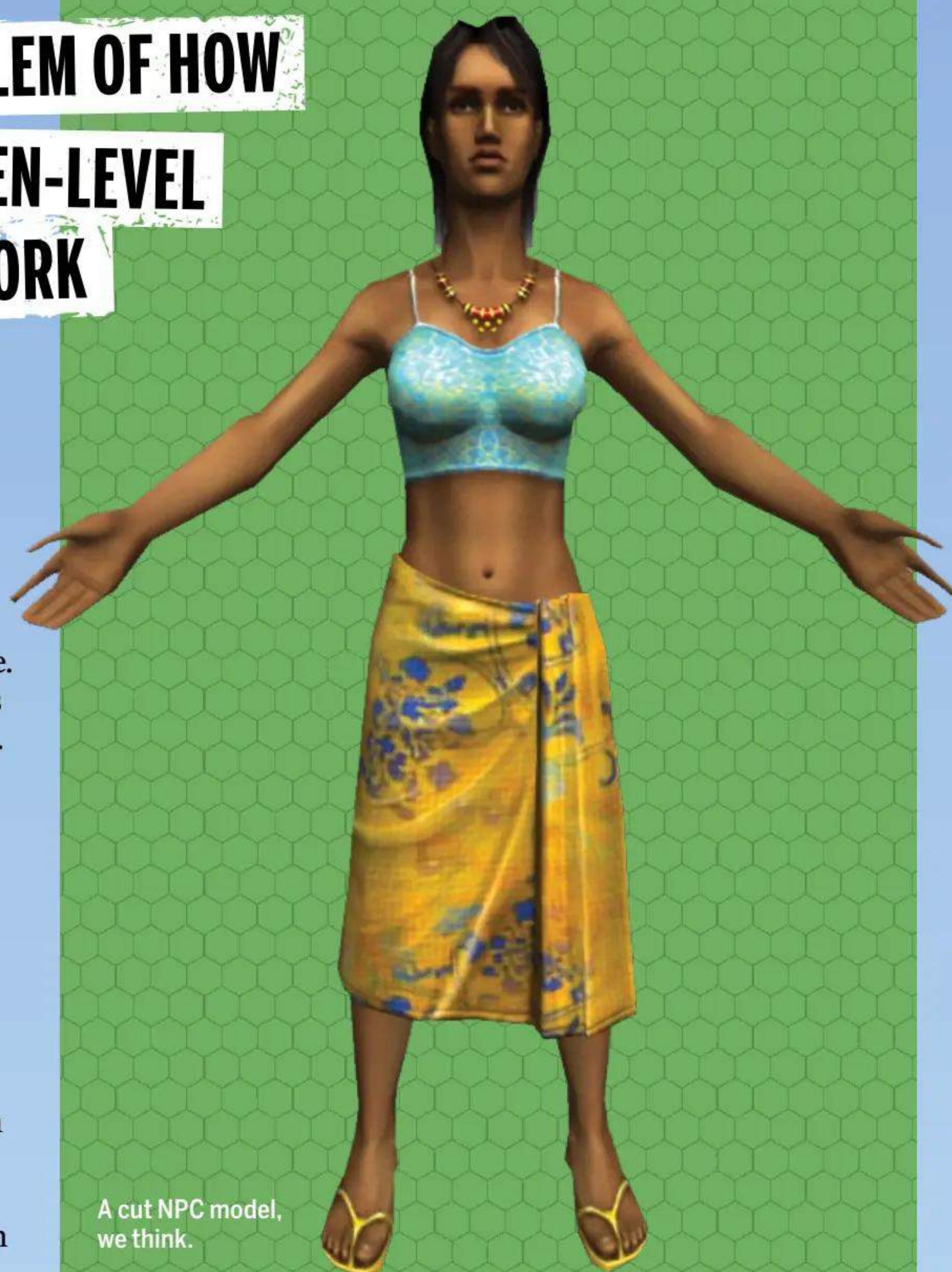
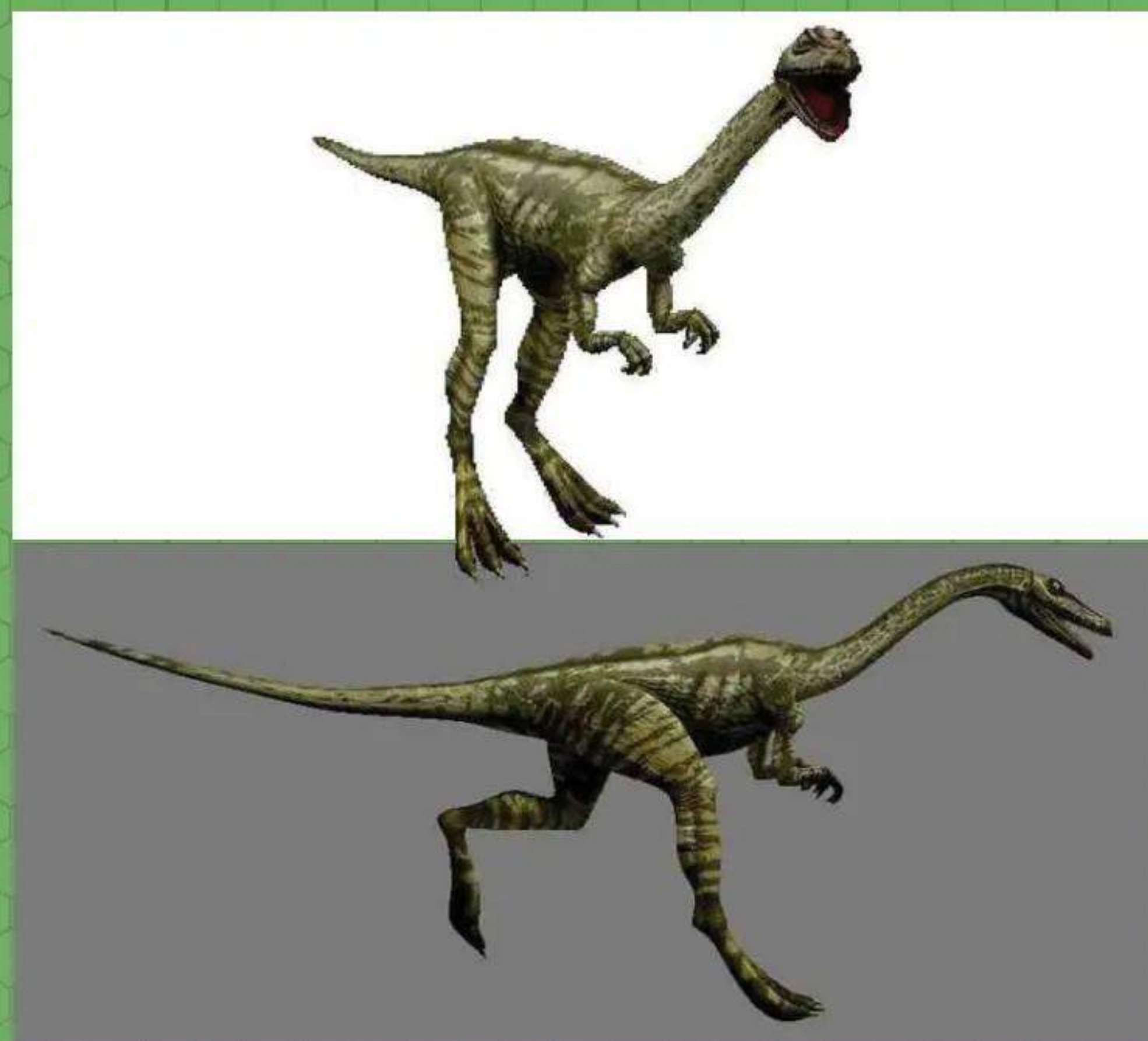
SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF HOW TO MAKE AN OPEN-LEVEL SHOOTER WORK

need that. Nobody’s doing this,” Yerli recalls. “It was the only time in my life when I said, ‘I’m the CEO, just do it.’”

This led to the creation of CryEngine’s Sandbox tool, one of the earliest examples of a real-time editing toolset within a game engine. With Sandbox, Yerli says, the team’s productivity absolutely skyrocketed. “Suddenly, we were iterating 100 times a day, as opposed to one or two iterations a day,” he explains. “That changed, even all the way to today, how engines were designed after CryEngine.”

CRYSTALLISATION

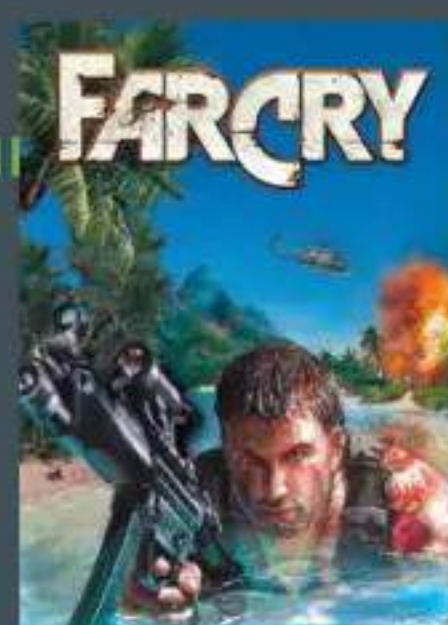
With a toolset that allowed them to iterate rapidly, Crytek could focus on solving the problem of how to make an open-level shooter work. Mostly, this involved trial and error, although



A cut NPC model, we think.

TIMELINE

Tracing Far Cry’s sequels and spiritual successors



March 2004:
Far Cry
(Crytek)



November 2007:
Crysis
(Crytek)



September 2008:
Crysis Warhead
(Crytek)



October 2008:
Far Cry 2
(Ubisoft Montreal)



March 2011:
Crysis 2
(Crytek)



November 2012:
Far Cry 3
(Ubisoft Montreal)



some broader ideas emerged over time. As development proceeded, Crytek came up with the idea of ‘action-bubbles’ where levels alternated between open, sandbox areas the player could experiment in, connected by more linear pathways that gave Crytek greater control over pacing. “We called it the *veni, vidi, vici* game,” Yerli says. “Every action bubble has to allow me to assess the situation and make up my own mind how I want to address this objective and how I want to fight.”

Eventually, *Far Cry*’s shooting grew to centre around ‘outsmarting’ enemies ‘versus out-reacting’ them, the latter being the norm for most shooters at the time. For this to work, *Far Cry* needed AI that could respond dynamically to the player’s movements and actions. “Typically,

ABOVE: Visually, *Far Cry* has aged considerably more than *Crysis*. But there is still beauty in its saturated tropical islands.

monsters and enemies in other shooters would be triggered by like a laser or an infrared light – some kind of virtual invisible trigger line,” Yerli says. *Far Cry*’s AI, by comparison, was “about hearing and seeing as opposed to being triggered”.

Far Cry wasn’t the first game to do this – other games like *Thief* and *Deus Ex* had pioneered similarly layered, perceptive NPC AI. But *Far Cry*’s system had to compete with the scale and density of its levels. “We had to cheat a bit,” Yerli says. “We made the [enemies] intelligent, but also the world said, ‘Hey, I’m a tree, you can hide here. I’m a rock, you can hide here.’ The world is broadcasting information to the AI.” This concept would become the backbone of other AI intensive games, such as *Alien: Isolation*.

By spring 2003, Crytek had a version of *Far Cry* that was about 80% complete. For that year’s E3 expo, the company took a small slice of the game they thought showcased the game best to use as its demo. The demo represented the work they’d done so far, was ecstatically received. There was just one small problem. “The rest of the game was nothing like it.”

Yerli explains that the demo was the only part of *Far Cry* where the ‘veni, vidi, vici’ gameplay loop happened all at the same time. “For the rest of the game it was either, ‘I just conquer,’ or, ‘I just see,’ or, ‘I just walk around,’” he says. “It wasn’t driving options.” Yerli wanted players to be moving between these states at each moment during play, switching between hunter and hunted, predator >>



February 2013:
Crysis 3
(Crytek)



May 2013: Far Cry 3
Blood Dragon
(Ubisoft Montreal)



November 2014:
Far Cry 4
(Ubisoft Montreal)



March 2016:
Far Cry Primal
(Ubisoft Montreal)



March 2018:
Far Cry 5 (Ubisoft
Montreal & Toronto)



February 2019:
Far Cry: New Dawn
(Ubisoft Montreal)



October 2021:
Far Cry 6
(Ubisoft Toronto)

Far Cry

and prey, in every combat set piece throughout the game.

With *Far Cry* supposed to launch at the end of 2003, Yerli decided the entire game needed to be rebuilt to embrace the design of the demo. Yerli says, "We figured out how to build *Far Cry* at E3."

CRYSIS

The final year of *Far Cry*'s development was a trial by fire, as Crytek rebuilt the game based on two years spent learning how to make it. Throughout this last year, the development was dogged by problems. Even with their 'intelligent' world, the complexity of the maps meant that getting AI to work as they wanted was still incredibly challenging. "Nvidia would tell us that your data amount going into the GPU and out is 100 times over anything in the market," Yerli says. "Ubisoft was rightly going nuts, because we would promise them AI every single week and it would take months. At some point, they said, 'Build corridors,' and I go, 'I can't build corridors. It's an island!'"

During this period, Crytek also cut several levels, to the point where they worried the game might be too short. "We had no experience in designing or scoping, understanding how big is big," Yerli says. "But Ubisoft said, 'No your game is just fine for the length'. And in hindsight it was a good thing because [the levels] didn't really add to the story." There was even a last-minute debate to remove the mutants from the game. But Crytek had nothing to replace them with. "We said if we

FAR CRY DEMONSTRATED THE POTENTIAL OF OPEN-WORLD GAMING OUTSIDE RPGS

TOP: Concept art of *Far Cry*'s second level, set on a wrecked aircraft carrier.

FAR RIGHT: Action bubbles are often connected by vehicular set-pieces.



kill them, we just have to introduce another set of [non-humanoid] AI," Yerli says. "It was too late for that."

Still, with two months left to go before launch, bugs and QA issues were piling up. "At some point, the management team of Ubisoft said, 'Why are you not fixing those bugs?'" Yerli was likewise puzzled, and went to speak to Andrey Khonich, the game's renderer lead. "Khonich said to me, 'Don't tell anybody but I'm writing a new renderer.'"

Yerli was confounded. "I was like, 'What are you talking about? We are finishing the game!' He's like, 'I'm almost done. It'll fix all the bugs, it's gonna be a lot better. I made mistakes in the design before.'"

Ultimately, Yerli decided to trust Khonich's judgement. "He was right. They QA'd the whole game and the thousands of [bugs] disappeared, and the game was running 50% faster." Nonetheless, it was a risky decision. "Everybody will say we are crazy, because you are about to ship the car and he's like, 'Wait, let me change that engine.'"

CRY HAVOC

Far Cry released on March 23 in the US, and three days later in the EU. "Everybody at Crytek was very scared," Yerli says. "We were working till the last day." Indeed, things were so tight that Crytek skipped a final round of external tests. "We had our

gold master DVD, by personal courier in a plane, delivered to the manufacturing facility so they could go straight to manufacturing the copies," he adds. "Things could have gone awfully wrong at that point. But we ran out of days."

Crytek need not have worried. *Far Cry*'s reception was overwhelmingly positive. PC Gamer awarded it a score of 95, writing, "Not only does *Far Cry* offer utterly sensational visuals and jaw-dropping gameplay, but it also heralds the arrival of developer Crytek, which now joins id Software and Valve at the head of the shooter class." To Yerli and the team, the reviews were a huge relief. "We were reborn at that point," he says.

Far Cry's immediate effect was to establish Crytek's position as a leading developer in the industry, and thoughts within the studio naturally turned to the next project. Which brings us to a question. Why did Ubisoft end up making *Crysis*, rather than *Far Cry 2*? "We could have done *Far Cry 2* in 12 months, tops," Yerli says. "But I [didn't] want to go into a sequel. I want us to manifest a culture of innovation and creation. So I want us to reinvent again." Yerli elaborates that, as Crytek now understood how to make games, he wanted to rebuild everything from the ground up. "CryEngine 2 was rewritten for *Crysis*, and *Crysis* was targeted to take every single thing that we did just light years ahead."

CRYOGENICS

Because of this decision, *Far Cry*'s legacy has two distinct strands to it. There is Crytek's own work on the *Crysis* series, which continued to push Crytek's interests in visual fidelity and emergent 'action bubble'

TRIGEN WAR

Here are the foes that made *Far Cry*'s latter half so challenging



CHIMP

The First TriGen you encounter. Can only use melee attacks, but its speed, strength and reach mean they can kill you quickly.



SQUEAKER

If you thought mercs were accurate, these speedy human TriGens can shoot the beads of seawater off your Hawaiian shirt.



FAT BOY

Wielding rocket launchers and able to withstand huge amounts of damage, *Far Cry*'s Fat Boys are the ultimate combat challenge.



An Omega mutant that didn't make it into the final game.

systems, and there are Ubisoft's direct sequels to *Far Cry*, which expanded their scope into true open worlds. Yerli says that, while he found *Far Cry 2* "a bit of a disappointment," on the whole he's "very proud" to see where the series has gone under Ubisoft's direction. "What I liked about it is they added a lot more storytelling to the open nature of the game, and combining that is not easy."

Far Cry's influence is also evident on a broader level. From a technical perspective, alongside the significance of CryEngine's real-time editor, *Far Cry* played a key role in the popularisation of 64-bit gaming. While it wasn't the first 64-bit game, it was the first to demonstrate significant performance improvements with AMD's 64-bit processors. Yerli even traces a line from *Far Cry* to the current AI boom. "Somebody in the chip market said to me, because of *Far Cry* and *Crysis*, a lot of people are working on AI... so it's partially your fault," he says. "Without *Far Cry* there would be no *Crysis*, and without *Crysis* there would not have been a significant push on GPUs."

While this link is perhaps more tenuous, *Far Cry*'s impact on wider

game design is much more concrete. Alongside the sequels and successors it spawned, *Far Cry* demonstrated the potential of open-world gaming outside RPGs, particularly to Ubisoft. "Back in the day, Ubisoft was a very different company. A lot of their games were not open like *Far Cry*," Yerli says. "Ubisoft inherited this DNA, not just for *Far Cry*, but for a lot of their games."

Far Cry's influence, then, is enormous. But what of the game at the heart of it all? Twenty years hence, it is more obviously the creation of a developer figuring out how to make its ideas work. Visually, it holds up surprisingly well. Not as well as *Crysis*, but there's still an allure in its brightly coloured jungles and crystalline blue oceans. Mechanically, though, its fuzzy stealth and preternaturally accurate AI make it punishingly difficult compared to the game's that followed it.

As Yerli points out, however, the elements that make *Far Cry* tougher to return to are also what made it happen in the first place. "*Far Cry* was only possible because we were inexperienced," he says. "You have to stand out. Stand out with what you do." ■



EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Contents

DIARY

- 112 Wrestling Empire: Part 1
- 116 Wrestling Empire: Part 2
- 120 Wrestling Empire: Part 3

MOD SPOTLIGHT

- 124 Star Wars mods
- 126 Lethal Company
- 128 Fallout show mods
- 130 Shame of Skyrim

REINSTALL

- 132 Grim Fandango
- 136 Syndicate

WHY I LOVE

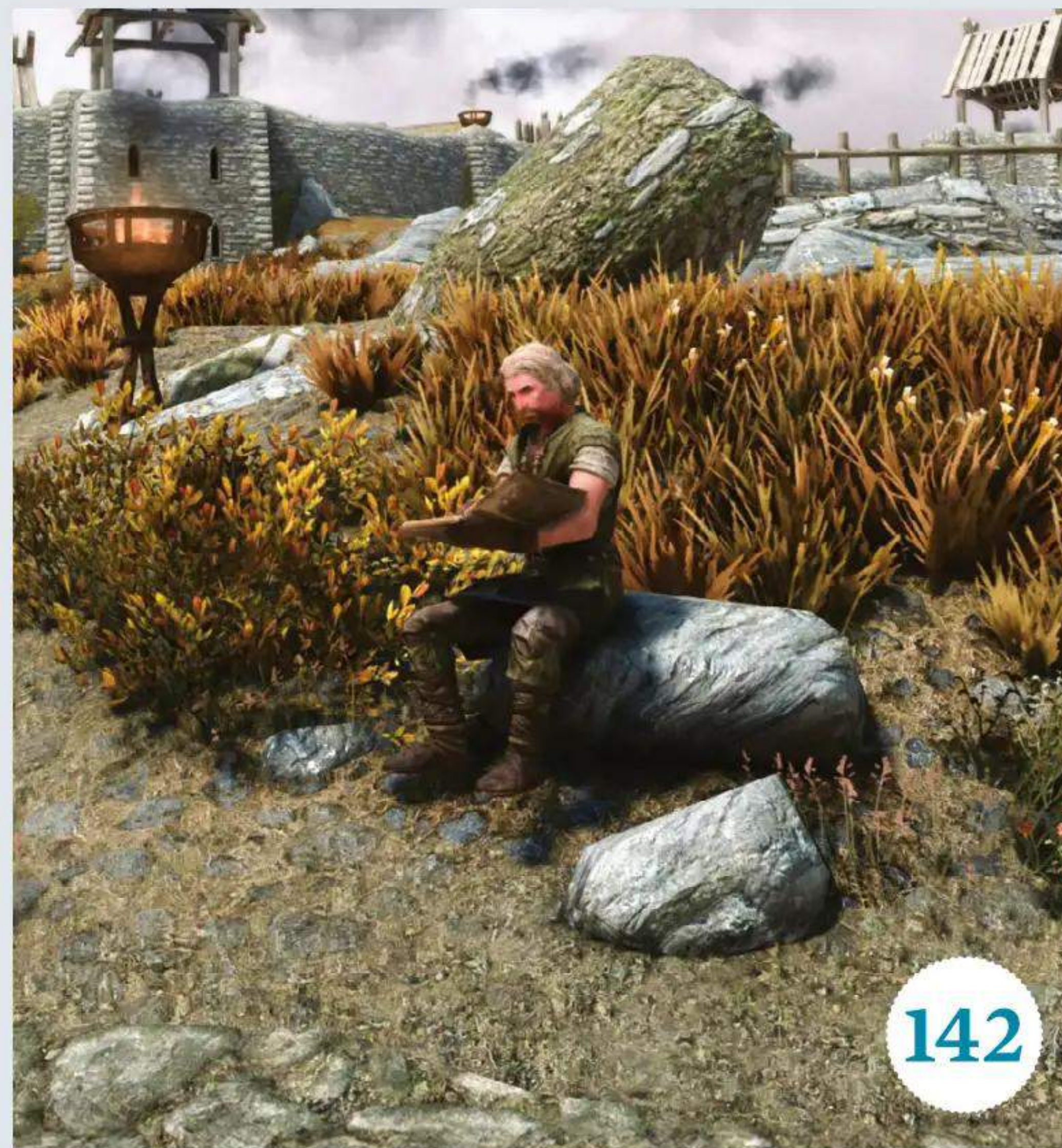
- 140 Project Wingman's 11th mission
- 142 Longplays
- 144 Tranquility Lane

136



112







DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMES

HUNTING FOR GOLD IN WRESTLING EMPIRE

PART 1

The Detectorist is here to bury opponents and unearth treasure in the world's strangest sports entertainment game.

By Matt Elliott

A glance at the Steam reviews of *Wrestling Empire* gives you a sense of how weird it is. In my case, it starts even before the game begins. I try the training mode to get a sense of how the game plays: wrestling titles are often notoriously complex, and *Wrestling Empire* is especially esoteric and emergent. Now, it's important you understand that this is the *tutorial*: literally the most staid, functional mode a game has. But, after less than a minute of sparring with my tutor, Coach Emerson, another wrestler charges in to join the fray. The invading superstar, Woodrow, insists that he "should be the main event at every event", conveniently ignoring the fact that said event is taking place in an empty arena. What should have been a sedate introduction becomes a bloody triple threat match. I learn nothing except that *Wrestling Empire* does not give one solitary damn about the rules. Even the training modes here are dangerous.

That feels like a fat block of text before we even get to character creation, but that's where we live now. If *Wrestling Empire* was a PC Gamer feature another writer would have already interrupted this piece, perhaps rightly, to take issue with me underscoring *Rocket League* years ago. There's a chance that you'd be in danger of taking a rogue chairshot just by reading this. And this is why the game is so good at capturing the most deranged aspects of sports entertainment: the WWE once featured a backstage skit in which Mae Young, a septuagenarian pioneer of women's wrestling, gave birth to a human hand. Anything can be a gimmick. Nothing is sacred.

THE RULES

1. No shortcuts. Work your way up from the bottom.
2. No do-overs. Embrace the results, however badly it goes.
3. Money is everything, life is nothing. Make bank, crush opponents.

RINGPULL OF HONOUR

With that thought in mind, it's time to create our new superstar. I'm presented with a wall of wrestlers with names like Disputin, who sounds like a school debate team made a child with Tsarina Alexandra's court physician. I decide to repurpose Rupert Royal, who, like many of *Wrestling Empire*'s creations, is a thinly veiled copy of an established star. In this case, it's the legendary British shoot wrestler William (or Steven) Regal. I've decided my wrestler should be British, so this is a solid

start. I decide to keep the height, reduce the weight, and give him the sort of gimmick that destroys careers: say hello to The Detectorist, a history-obsessed hobbyist who uses a shovel as an illegal implement. His finishing move is called Fool's Gold and he bears a suspicious resemblance to Mackenzie Crook. It's awful, but it could be worse: the WWE creative team once decided that Mantaur – half-man, half-bull, all bullshit – would be an effective gimmick. I spend most of the time in the character creator trying to come up with the sort of casual outfit that says, "Yes, I do spend my weekends accidentally digging up Tizer ring-pulls." I start with a

THE PHRASE 'WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER' IS NONSENSE

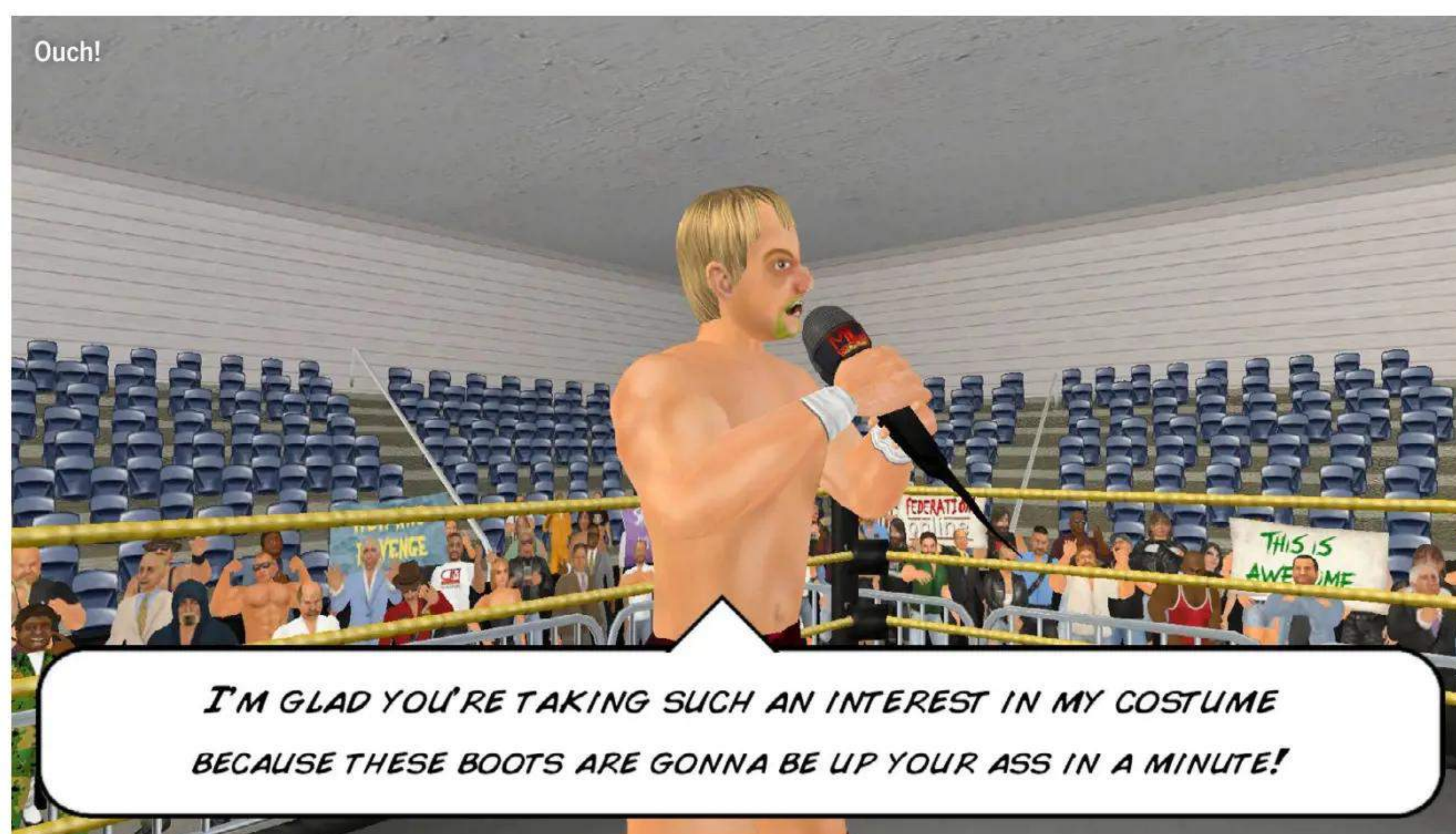
combination of plaid shirt, cargos and sturdy walking shoes. To finish the look, I add a functional, multi-pocket gilet for carrying around whatever it is metal detectorists need to not-find buried treasure. He is, without doubt, the least-threatening wrestler ever created. He makes the Gobbledy Gooker look like Goldberg. I'm not going to let this stop me, though. I decide that unlike the affable amateur archaeologists from the BAFTA-winning BBC comedy, my detectorist is unhinged. Too much time spent alone in the Fens has given him a powerful hatred of people. If he can't find gold through judicious use of a detector, he'll win a wrestling title instead.

There's a slight problem. For some reason, The Detectorist starts his career looking like shrink-wrapped mince. I'm not sure if I've missed a cutscene (I haven't, there aren't any), but my wrestler is more beaten up than a jobber after a match with the Steiner brothers. His health and motivation are low to begin with, and just being conscious seems to hurt him. Proof, as if it was needed, that the phrase 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' is utter nonsense. The Detectorist is getting weaker just by being alive.

There's another issue. In my haste to make an amateur relic hunter, I've joined a promotion that apparently doesn't pay me, and I'm actually becoming *less* famous by wrestling for them. I'm not even sure that changing promotions was even possible at the start, but it's not the point. The Detectorist is going to work his way upwards, like an Anglo Saxon belt buckle being unearthed on a damp Sunday morning. This is one of the rules. No shortcuts. I could go into the booking mode and elevate his career, but this is a man with a limitless capacity for drudgery. He'll make it the hard way, or not at all.

TUBE STRIKE

His first match is against Polka Paulo, a man whom I hate on principle, despite (or perhaps because) he's so charming. He's honoured to be my first opponent. I respond by getting





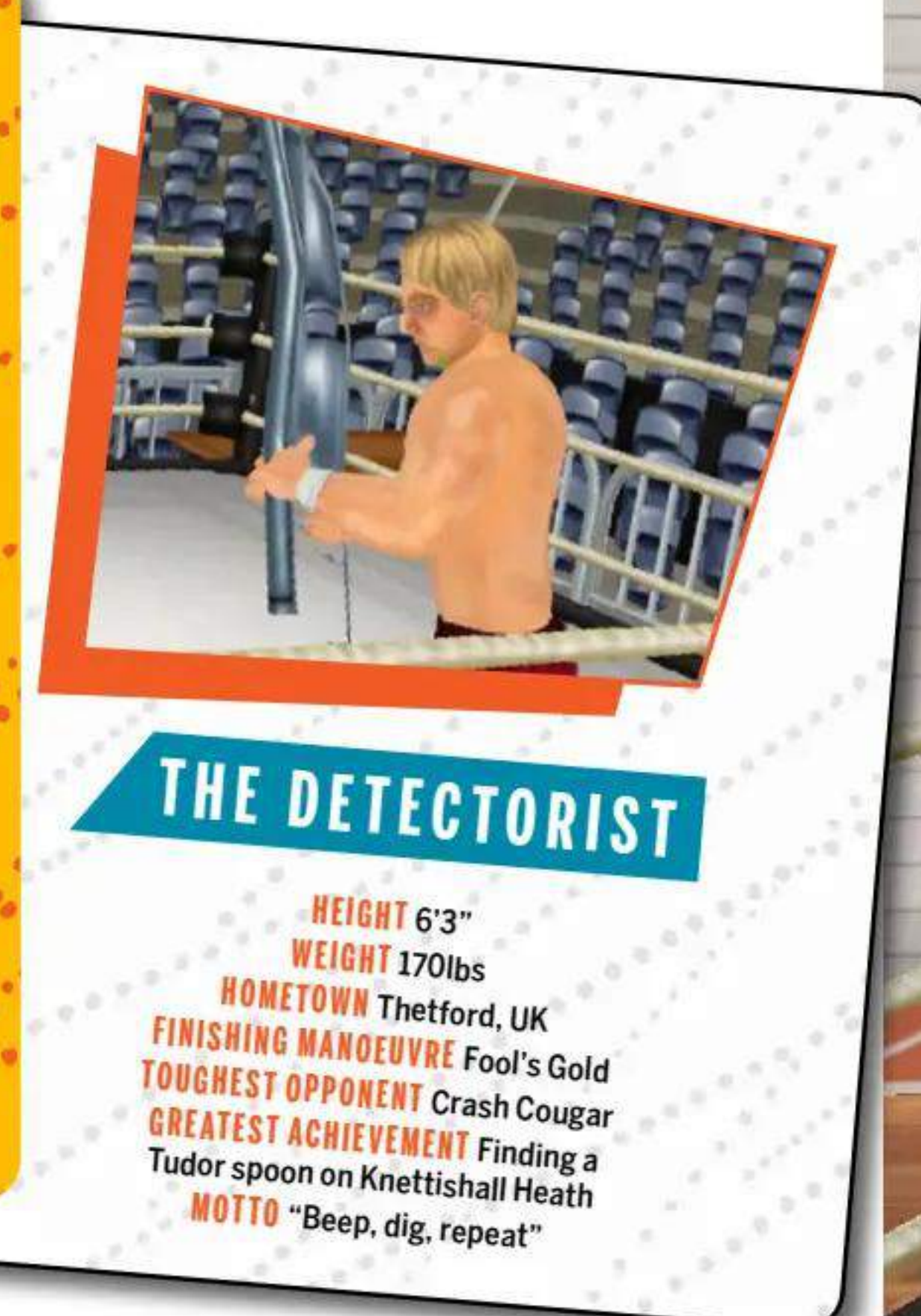
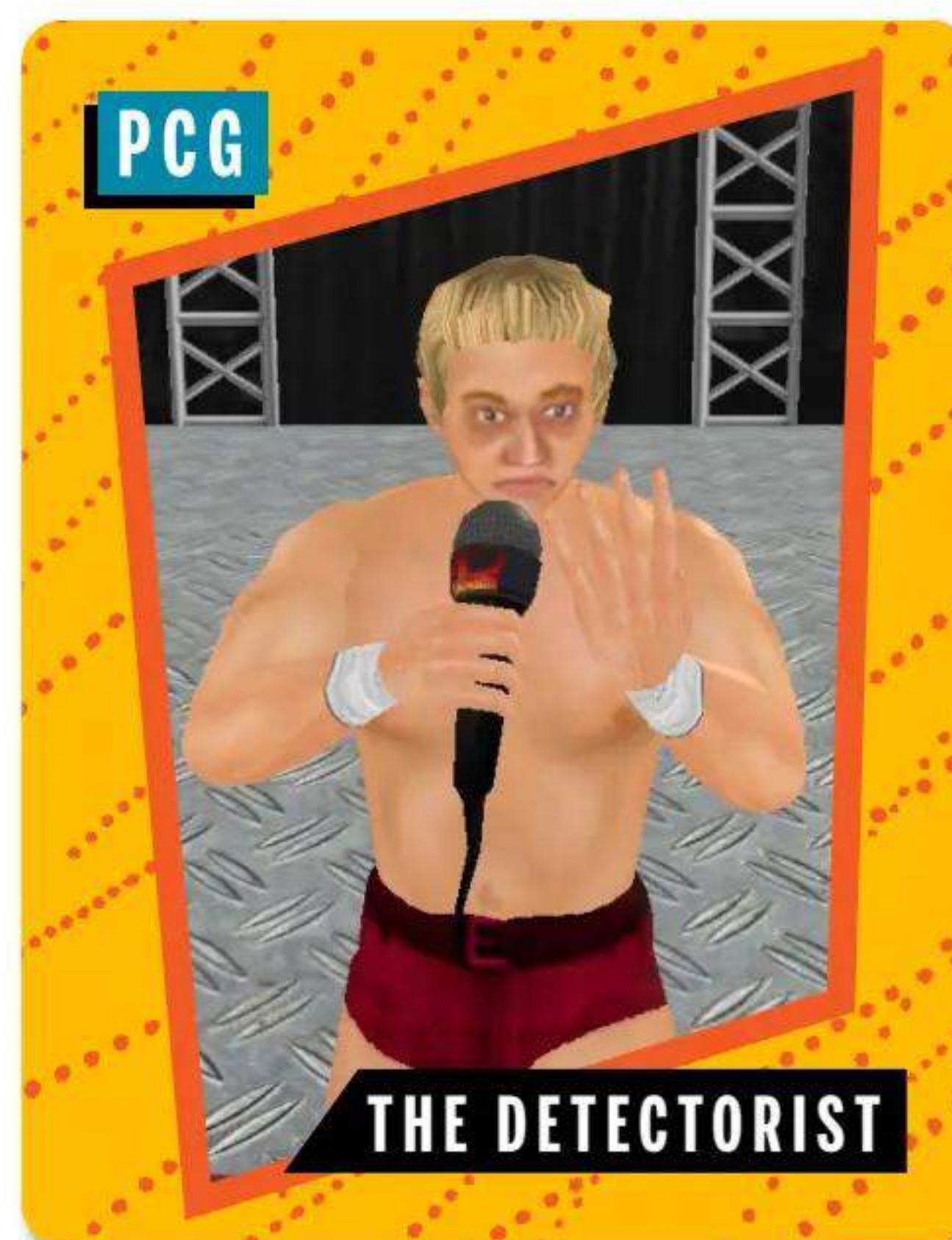
» myself disqualified after two minutes when I bludgeon him with my trusty shovel. I send a message to the locker room by breaking a fluorescent tube over Paulo's head. I'm not sure what the message is – don't trust The Detectorist with mercury-vapour gas-discharge lighting solutions, perhaps – but a marker has been laid down. There's a new man in town, and he's looking for historical artefacts. And trouble.

After the match, Coach Emerson asks me to step in as a special referee for another bout. It's worth \$500, so I say yes. As established in rule #2 above, The Detectorist's lust for gold extends to him doing literally anything for money. It's almost certainly going to get worse than this. It's not physically possible for me to understand what's happening any less than I do. I have to look up referee controls on Reddit during the match. The excellent by-product of this is that I learn how to light weapons on fire; a series of words that in no way should be used in the same sentence as 'wrestling' or 'referee'. Sadly, the match is over before Chekov's flaming sledgehammer can be used. The audience would be disappointed if there was one, but, once again, we're wrestling in an empty arena.

After the match, I wander around the area and sleep on the floor of the lobby, because that's what all the other wrestlers are doing. The Detectorist wakes up in the wrong kind of mood for his press conference with his new nemesis, Crash Cougar. We hate Crash Cougar. He's dressed like one of the Headbangers, nobody's favourite Attitude-era tag team, and he makes fun of my boots. The Detectorist manages to scrape his first win, in a match that's surprisingly good. At this point I also decide to make it my life's purpose to end Crash Cougar's career.

I get the opportunity to do so soon afterwards, when we're booked in a last-man-standing match. Weapons are not just allowed, but positively encouraged. For some reason, my trinket-obsessed brawler thrives in this chaotic environment, battering Crash with everything from steel chairs to video cameras. It's the trusty shovel that finishes him off, though. Without an audience to spur us on, the match takes on the aspect of the sort of viral fight video

BELOW: Absolutely nothing bad can come of this.



the unhinged kid at school shares, but a win is a win. I celebrate my victory by digging a hole through the middle of the ring, as if there's a Celtic torc buried under the mat. The ultimate humiliation for Crash.

The Detectorist's adventures continue outside the ring. The promotion is short on commentators, so I heroically step in: an odd request, given the total absence of viewers. As far as I can tell, commentating doesn't actually involve much other than sitting at a table during a match and making a prediction, which I get horribly wrong. But, like everything else in *Wrestling Empire*, you can do whatever you want. I decide to go for a stroll instead of staying at the announcer's table, and, in my haste to sit back down, accidentally punch my (female) co-commentator in the face. This feels like a heel move even for The Detectorist, but luckily nobody seems to notice or care. With the event over, I decide to find a more comfortable place to sleep, which takes me to the hospital, where I know there are beds. I lay down for six hours of comfortable rest, and when I wake up in the morning, a mysterious doctor offers me anabolic steroids. This will obviously help speed up his shovelling, so The Detectorist eagerly agrees. On top of this, the mental image of Mackenzie Crook blown up on performance-enhancing drugs is moderately amusing.

ROID TO PERDITION

There's another benefit. The Detectorist's newfound muscle is perfect for brutalising Crash Cougar. I find him lurking around in the street outside the venue and decide to give him a damn good shovelling. I leave him a bloodied mess, but I'm sadly unable to end his career, perhaps because, as a mid-card talent with a gimmick that was old in 1998, he doesn't have one. I follow up this actual crime with a celebration: Macho Man lookalike Score Benz invites me to a bar, and I gladly accept. This section convinces me that *Wrestling Empire* is the best sports entertainment game ever made. I stand on the bar chugging beers with Score Benz, then realise I can sit down at the piano. More than





THE DETECTORIST'S NEWFOUND MUSCLE IS PERFECT FOR BRUTALISING

this, I can *play* the piano. It sounds like a one-man band falling down a flight of stairs, but the game doesn't care: apparently I've played it enough for my skill to increase. This rounds off the greatest night of The Detectorist's career: smarter thanks to slapping a pub piano with his grasping hands, stronger thanks to anabolic steroids.

All this, of course, would mean more if anyone was watching. The Detectorist is actually getting *less famous* with every match. On top of this, he's paid basically nothing and feels the need to supplement his wages by moonlighting as a guest referee or colour commentator. This is no way to live for a man so obsessed with financial gain that he literally digs in the soil to find valuable trash.

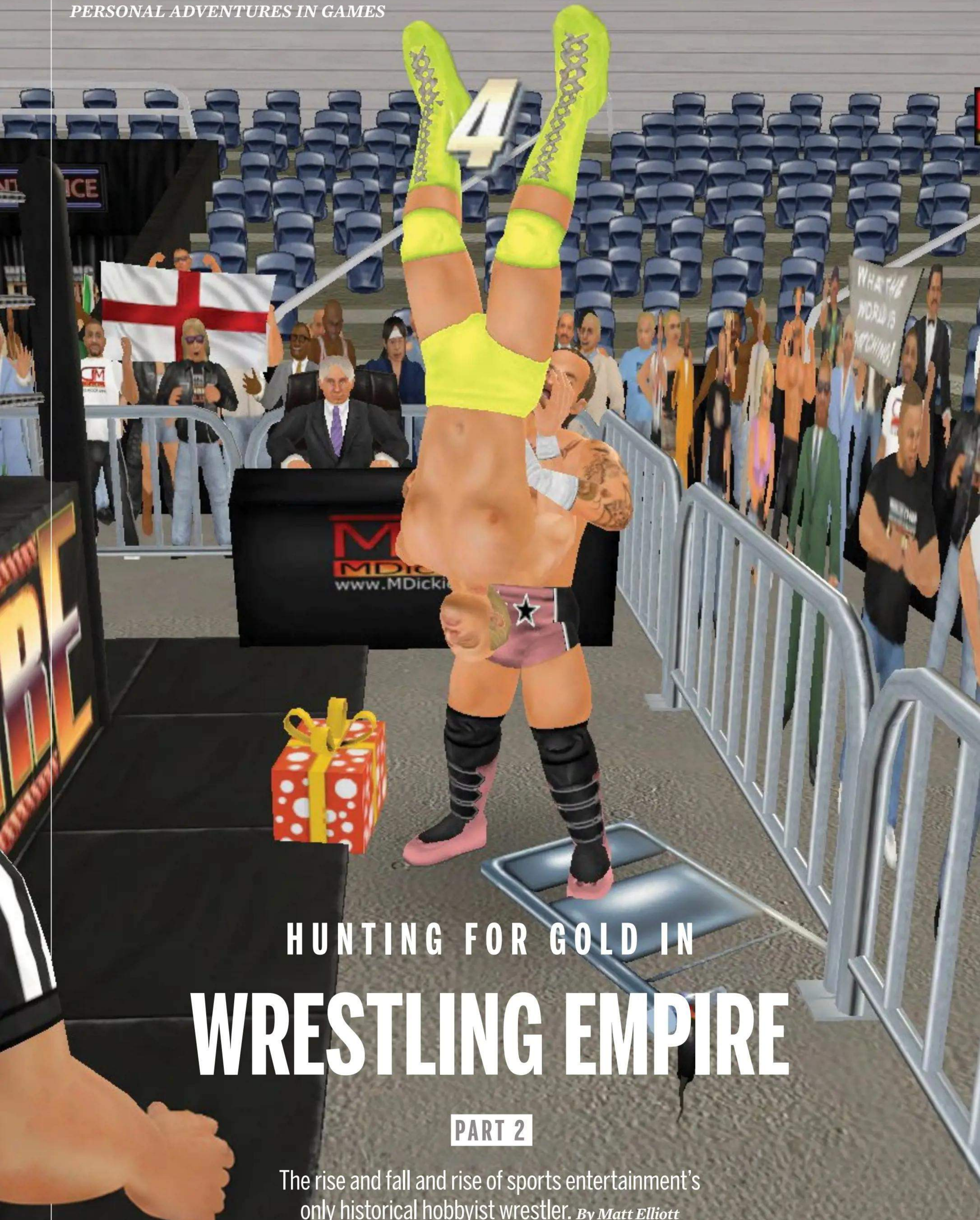
So, when he's approached by another, bigger federation, cartoon dollar signs appear in his eyes.

LUCHA MORALS

There are some problems. Firstly, the promotion is Super Lucha Libre. If you're not familiar with the term, it refers to a branch of wrestling, originating from Mexico, characterised by colourful masks and acrobatic moves. If The Detectorist was a colour he'd be antelope beige. He's never climbed a turnbuckle. The closest he's ever come is clambering onto the bar during his night out with Score Benz. He is entirely unsuitable for this federation. But it gets worse. He's being offered a contract as 'enhancement talent': essentially the guys who lose in order to make other wrestlers look better. We have, however, established the rules. It pays better, so he has to say yes. But there are many ways to lose a wrestling match. If a few opponents get horribly injured along the way – either during the match, or in a tragic subway accident after the event – then it's a price The Detectorist is willing to pay. ■

ABOVE: Are you even refereeing if you haven't set fire to a sledgehammer?





HUNTING FOR GOLD IN WRESTLING EMPIRE

PART 2

The rise and fall and rise of sports entertainment's only historical hobbyist wrestler. *By Matt Elliott*

He's back! By gawd, The Detectorist is back!" Assuming, of course, anyone even noticed he was away. Probably not. Such is the mild indifference to the return of wrestling's only archaeology-themed curtain jerker. It brings to mind the excruciating WWE comeback of Brian Christopher, son of Jerry 'The King' Lawler and the man previously known as Grandmaster Sexay. Such was the indifference of the crowd that the reboot of his career was over before he reached the ring. Hopefully, The Detectorist will fare better.

There are challenges ahead. When we last saw him, The Tizer Ringpull Terroriser was locked into a contract with Super Lucha Libre wrestling, a Mexican promotion that specialises in exhilarating, high-flying spectacle. The first problem is that The Detectorist has the agility and appeal of an orthopaedic shoe. The most dynamic move in his repertoire is a baseball slide through the ropes, the controls for which I've refused to learn on principle. Secondly, he's employed as 'enhancement talent'; or, as it's known in wrestling parlance, a 'jobber'. He only gets paid if he loses, and the only thing that matters is getting paid. This might be an acceptable place to be for a vigorous youth, but The Detectorist is 42 years old. His potential career is slipping through his fingers like the sands from a smashed hourglass. He's in danger of being a depressing Wikipedia stub. This is especially true in a game like *Wrestling Empire*, in which wrestlers can age and even die. The inexorable march of time is The Detectorist's most potent foe.

THE RULES

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BABY STEPS

It's not impossible. Wrestler-turned-yoga guru Diamond Dallas Page didn't start wrestling until he was 35, so there is some limited hope for The Detectorist. Bolstered by these positive thoughts, I decide we need a change. The Saxon Trinket Suplex Machine spent the first part of the diary dressed, somewhat inexplicably, in red plaid trunks. As a concession to a fresh start, I update his outfit to a dashing gold, reflecting the ultimate goal of both his hobby and career. Somehow, during this process, I also accidentally change his prop from a thematically-sound

shovel to a ring step. As well as being unrelated to his gimmick, it's exceedingly hard to cut an engaging promo when you're cradling a piece of ring infrastructure.

Aside from that, we're off to a decent start. Almost immediately, another wrestler approaches The Detectorist, determined to put aside the rivalry between us. I'm fine with this, because until now I didn't realise we had a rivalry. A new tag team is born. Say hello to – and I promise I'm not making this up – The Detectorist and Uranus. A name that sounds like a banned children's book from the '70s. In Uranus' defence, he's based on Perry Saturn, a man so

THE PROMOTER, DEREK SWITCHOFF, SUGGESTS THAT HE TRY A SPELL AS A FACE

legitimately tough he rescued a woman from being assaulted by two men, got shot in the neck, then returned to wrestling once he recovered. The only danger is that Uranus will be such a competent partner that The Detectorist might accidentally win.

ABOUT FACE

The Low Tone Luchador continues to follow instructions, throwing matches and even stepping in on commentary. It's humiliating work for scant reward, not least because I've only just realised that carrying my prop to the ring – the stairs, remember, that I didn't even choose – is costing me half of my pay cheque. The Detectorist's attitude improves, to the point that the promoter, Derek Switchoff, suggests that he try a spell as a Face: wrestling slang for a fan favourite. And who among us wouldn't cheer for a balding, 42-year-old hobbyist relic hunter who's paid to lose every week?

It doesn't go especially well. After spending just a few months at Super Lucha Libre, the Pulse Induction Pugilist reaches the end of his contract. Derek Switchoff decides not to renew it. It's a crushing blow for The Detectorist, but not, perhaps, a surprising one; last week I accidentally hit Switchoff with a hamburger.

Bowed but unbroken, The Detectorist returns to Wrestling School, where you learn nothing and don't get paid. Only his erstwhile rival, Polka Paulo, is remotely pleased to see him.

The switch to a new federation also means saying goodbye to Uranus: words as painful to write as I'm sure they are to read. But perhaps it's for the best. The Detectorist was never a luchador. He didn't belong there. It's not a mistake he'll make again. From now on, the most electromagnetic man in sports entertainment will be true to himself. No more compromises. No more restrictive contracts. And he needs to get out of Wrestling School quickly. Just competing for such an inferior brand is hurting his popularity, even when he's winning matches.



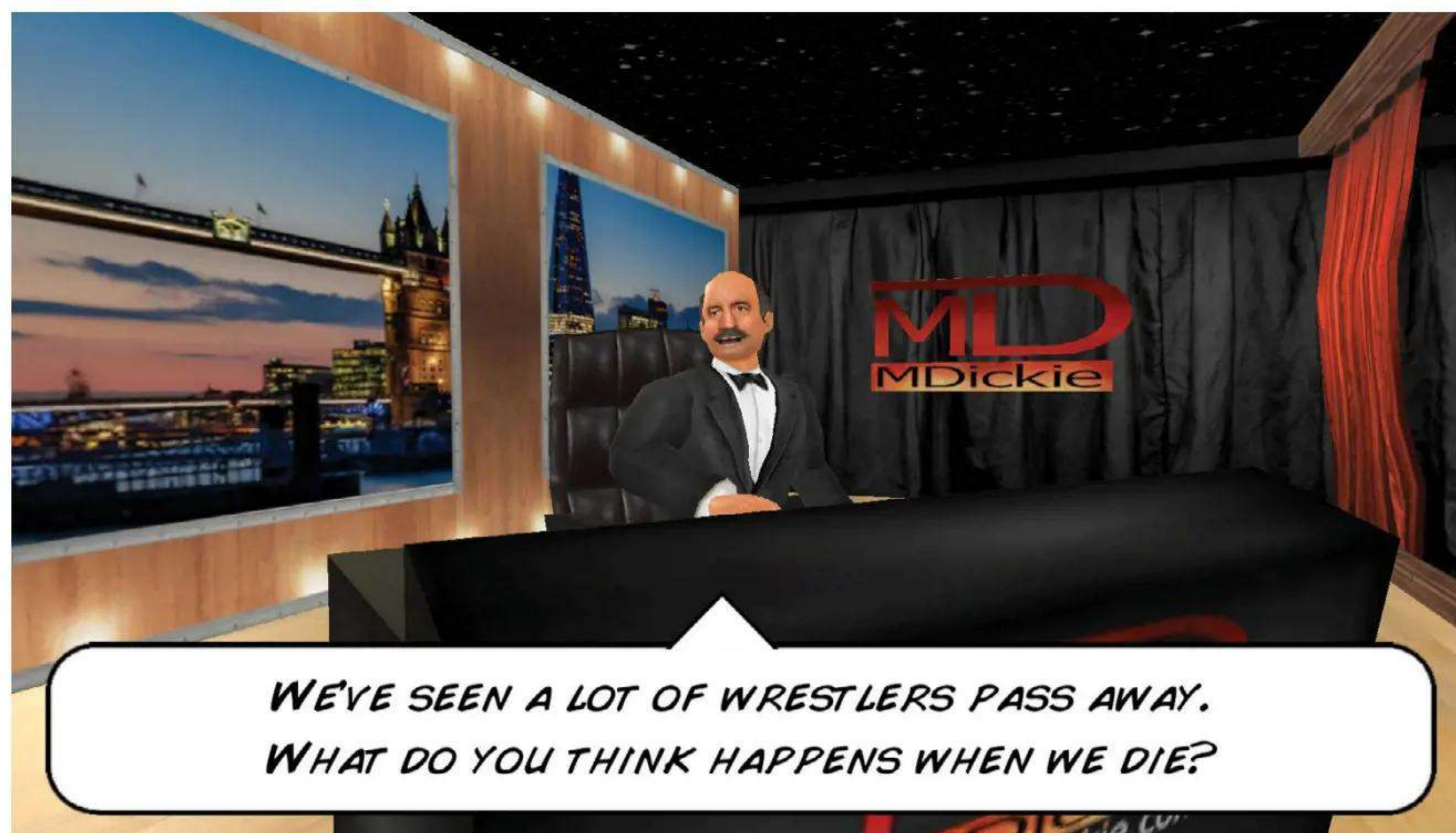
It's hard to demonstrate gravitas while you're obscured by a steel step.

» **CACHE ON DELIVERY**

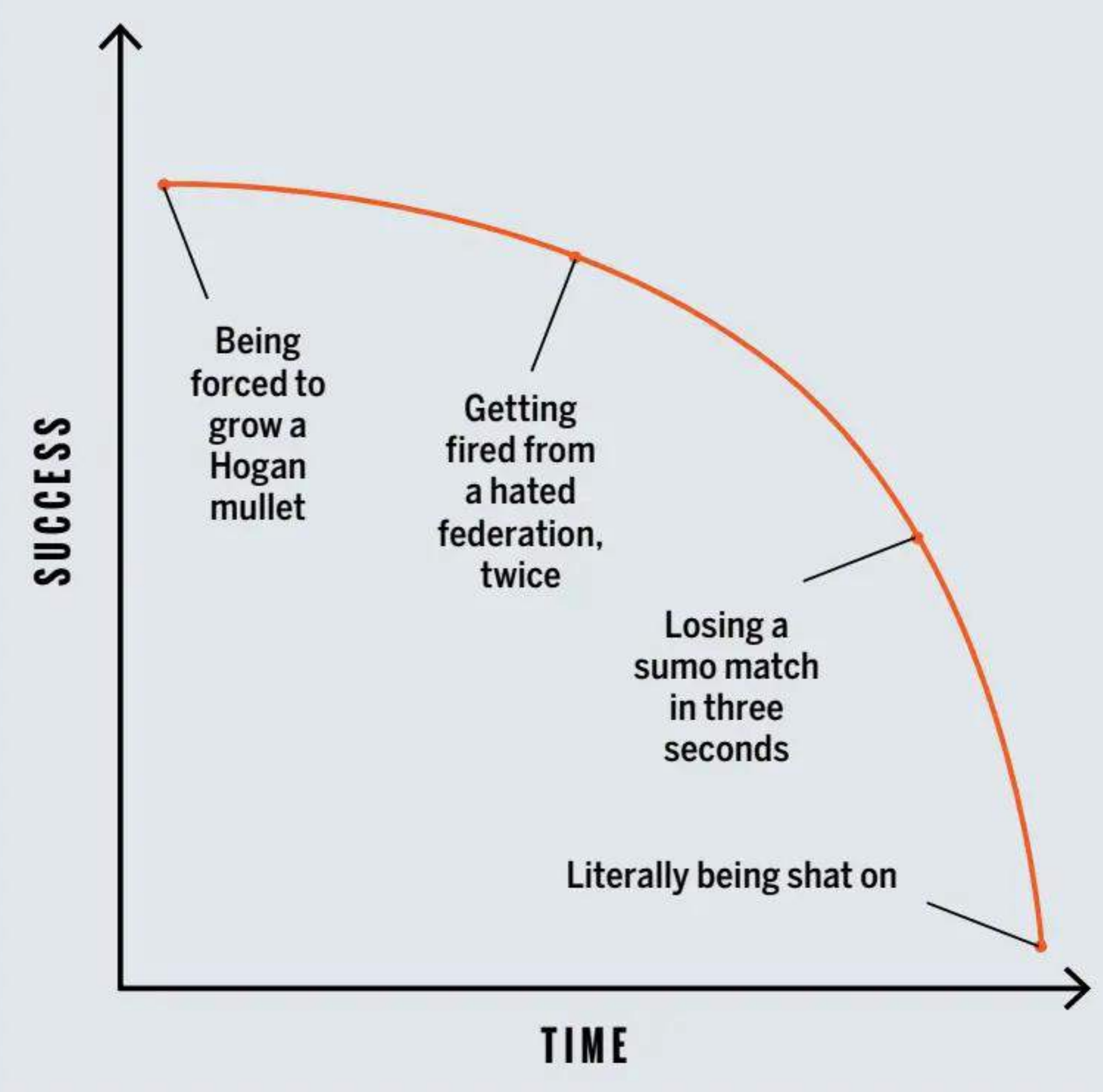
Sadly, no contracts are forthcoming. Despite schlepping it on the very lowest rung of the wrestling ladder, it's an eventful few months for The Detectorist. The Wrestling School promoter, Coach Emerson, suggests that The Detectorist try a new haircut, which is essentially a monk's tonsure with the front missing. This look, combined with the gold trunks, accidentally transforms our hero into a kind of desiccated British Hulk Hogan, with none of the charisma, balance, or physical presence. He also works up a nice little sideline in being paid to help other wrestlers illegally win their matches, which just about covers the cost of bringing a prop to the ring. The fans also decide that The Detectorist will never be a face, returning him to his comfort zone as a sneering, spineless villain. Then, something strange happens: I get booked in a match against the Wrestling School Group Project Champions, Mike Bail and Shank, a pair of orange jumpsuited ne'er do wells with whom The Detectorist has been feuding. His partner for this is Eri Konami, a dashing woman wrestler who he's literally never spoken to before. It doesn't matter. Through a mix of desperation, chemistry and a scandalous indifference to the rules of professional wrestling, The Detectorist and Eri are able to put their opponents away and take the gold. It's tag team gold, admittedly – the Temu version of a wrestling championship – but it's still a victory.

Bolstered by this unexpected success, it's only a matter of time before other promotions come looking for a slice of the Hedge-fodder Hellion. And, sure enough, just a few weeks after his championship win, a new promotion comes knocking at his door. The problem? It's Super bastard Lucha bloody Libre again, offering garbage money and forcing a no-compete clause. But the rules we set are clear: if the money is better, The Detectorist has to say yes. And anything is better than no money. He returns to the promotion that wronged him before, leaving his title belts and new tag-team partner behind. It's a terrible decision. After no time at all, confirmed wrestling villain Derek Switchoff tries to change the terms of my contract and reduce my pay. The Detectorist tells him to stick it up his discriminator, and Switchoff replies by promising to make his life hell. He even stoops to refereeing matches

BELOW: Come here for suplexes and big existential questions.

**PLUMBING THE DEPTHS**

The lows and lowers of a wrestling career



himself, which is an especially wretched way of ensuring The Detectorist fails. And the worst thing is that I can no longer write 'not even Vince McMahon would stoop that low!', because we all now know that his depths of stoopdom are too feral and preposterous to articulate. The only positive is that at least The Detectorist is reunited with Uranus *sideways glance emoji*.

SOILED AGAIN

Aside from that, it's a wretched time. His losses mount up. The company has turned against him. A 500lb wrestler accidentally shits on him in the changing room. And, before long, his contract ends – again – and he's right back to where he started again: older, sadder, smellier and only slightly richer. In many ways, he's happy for this to be the end of his story: as a mentor to the young, friend to Polka

Paulo, and mortal enemy of Mike Bail. The Detectorist prepares to slide into the warm bath of obscurity, and let the lustre fade from his dreams of stardom and gold. No more excitement. No big changes.

This is, of course, when Rising Sun Puro Puroresu gets in touch. They want to sign The Detectorist for a handsome \$1,300 a week, on the proviso that he doesn't have any creative control. Whatever recommendations they make, he has to agree to. This is a man, however, who agreed to shave himself bald for zero dollars a week, so the prospect of this doesn't frighten him. Rising Sun's first creative tweak is to change his music from effete British chamber music to pulsating, homoerotic disco. Does it fit? Absolutely not. Do we care? Also no. Despite being on the



A 500LB WRESTLER ACCIDENTALLY SHITS ON HIM IN THE CHANGING ROOM

far side of the world, with a gimmick nobody understands, The Detectorist is happy for the first time in his career. He even takes part in his first sumo match, which, at 6'2" and 145lbs, he is entirely unsuited for. As you might expect, he lasts around three seconds. It doesn't matter. The Detectorist has found his new home.

HOARD MENTALITY

Disaster strikes. He's approached by Strong Style Wrestling, another Japanese federation with an emphasis on stiff strikes and high-impact matches. Under normal circumstances, The Detectorist would never contemplate leaving his new federation, but our rules are clear. They offer him more money. He has to leave. This is something of a revelation for The Detectorist. The promoters expect more from him. He has to climb walls to improve his agility and punch bags to increase skill. Against everyone's expectations, he starts to function as a compelling, capable wrestler. I'm almost disappointed. He even starts lifting weights between

matches to increase his strength. If he doesn't get it to a certain level in a month, however, he's out the door. It's a lot to balance for a man with the athletic prowess of a loading zone signpost. He's almost there, when fate intervenes. He sustains a serious injury in a match against the *Wrestling Empire* version of Daniel Bryan, which makes it literally impossible to meet the goals set for him. He even tries paying for surgery to get back to strength quicker, but it's not even going to be close. He's a broken man. The bubbling sewer of Wrestling School beacons, once again.

Then, in his darkest hour, salvation arrives, in the form of yet another job offer. The problem? It's from Weekend Warriors, *Wrestling Empire*'s equivalent of the UFC. It's all cage matches, submissions and shootfighting. This is perhaps an even worse fit for him than Super Lucha

Libre: a place full of actual martial artists, with a significant, ongoing threat of physical injury. To the Weekend Warriors roster, The Detectorist is little more than a comedy stuntman. It's like making a naked mole rat fight a honey badger. Perhaps, then, it's time for a rebrand. The man formerly known as The Detectorist will now be known as The Coinshooter: the only fighter in history to combine mixed martial arts with the obsessive search for historical artefacts. But, for a man who spends his Sundays searching for evidence of medieval battles, perhaps the Weekend Warriors is the best place for him. ■

ABOVE: With special guest referee, Guy Who Brings His Guitar To Your House Party.





HUNTING FOR GOLD IN WRESTLING EMPIRE

PART 3

Shark tanks, explosions and shameless shilling in the final part of The Detectorist's journey. *By Matt Elliott*

When we last saw him, The Detectorist was enjoying a pleasant upturn in fortunes. He'd been fired, re-hired and injured, and had fallen victim to a systematic regime of bullying and belittlement by the owner of the promotion at which he worked. It was almost as if a hobbyist archaeology gimmick based on a gentle BBC comedy was a poor fit for professional wrestling. But, in his most desperate hour, he was offered a contract by the Weekend Warriors, an MMA-themed promotion that specialises in shootfighting.

So, the good news is that The Detectorist has a paying gig again. The bad news is that he has never won via submission during his entire career. I'm not joking when I say this: I don't know which button applies a submission in *Wrestling Empire*, since I've spent most of my time throwing matches or setting fire to foreign objects. The Detectorist is wholly unsuited to this new direction, but destiny has made an incremental beeping noise. He must embrace this opportunity or face being buried beneath the loam, like the trinkets he so feverishly seeks.

UNDERGROUND WRESTLING

It's a trying start. For some reason, his first few matches are against the owner of the company, Danny Might, who's basically like a fire-damaged Lego version of Dana White from the UFC. The Detectorist pummelling him with a shovel, however, doesn't seem to damage their working relationship. Their rivalry builds to the point that they're booked in a sumo contest, which is a strange thematic twist for a match set within a steel cage. If it's possible to throw people over the cage, neither The Detectorist nor Danny Might know how. In the end, our trinket-laden hero wins via knockout. But it's not enough. He can't keep scraping by at the Weekend Warriors because the money is decent.

The frustration builds. In a moment of madness, he gets into a brawl with a superstar from another promotion – Federico Fisher, apparently – and The Detectorist throws him into the path of an oncoming train. Fisher survives, but The Detectorist is branded careless and his

popularity plummets. As the late, great Owen Hart observed: enough is enough. It's time for a change.

For this paragraph, I would appreciate it if you imagine some montage music. For the first time in his life, The Detectorist embraces the new. He rebrands as The Coinshooter: a name that cunningly combines a love of mixed martial arts with archaeology. He learns some new strikes to better survive in the brutal world of cagefighting. And I even learn how to execute submission moves, because we're in this together. It won't be easy. But this is The Coinshooter's last furtive search for gold before the light of his career fails.

THEIR RIVALRY BUILDS TO THE POINT THAT THEY'RE BOOKED IN A SUMO CONTEST

PLANTAIN B

This leads to his first glimpse of real gold. Not a title match, sadly: a banana. Danny Might offers him \$900 to shill the elongated fruit during the promo of his next match. As the rules of this diary state, The Coinshooter can't and won't turn down any opportunity to make money, so he does exactly as he's asked, to the total disgust of the crowd and his opponent, Slam Dunk. All his promos now will feature unsolicited banana facts, "Banana flavouring, such as that in sweets and milkshakes, doesn't taste like the actual fruit because it's based on a historic, almost extinct variety called the Gros Michele. It was wiped out by disease and replaced by the larger, hardier variety known as the Cavendish. And I'M GONNA KICK YOUR ASS."

As well as being a nice way to earn extra cash, having a banana is useful. The Coinshooter often ends up starting matches in poor condition, so munching some fruit at the start of the match helps recover some health. It also feels weirdly on-brand, especially with the gold trunks and thinning blond hair. He's like weaponised jaundice. His contract expires, but this time it's good news: The Coinshooter's dedication means that he's re-signed on a

'Downside Guarantee', meaning he gets paid whether he competes or not. And he takes full advantage of this after a press conference discussing his new contract. Instead of competing in his match, he snoozes in his interview chair and there's literally nothing the promoters can do. It's glorious.

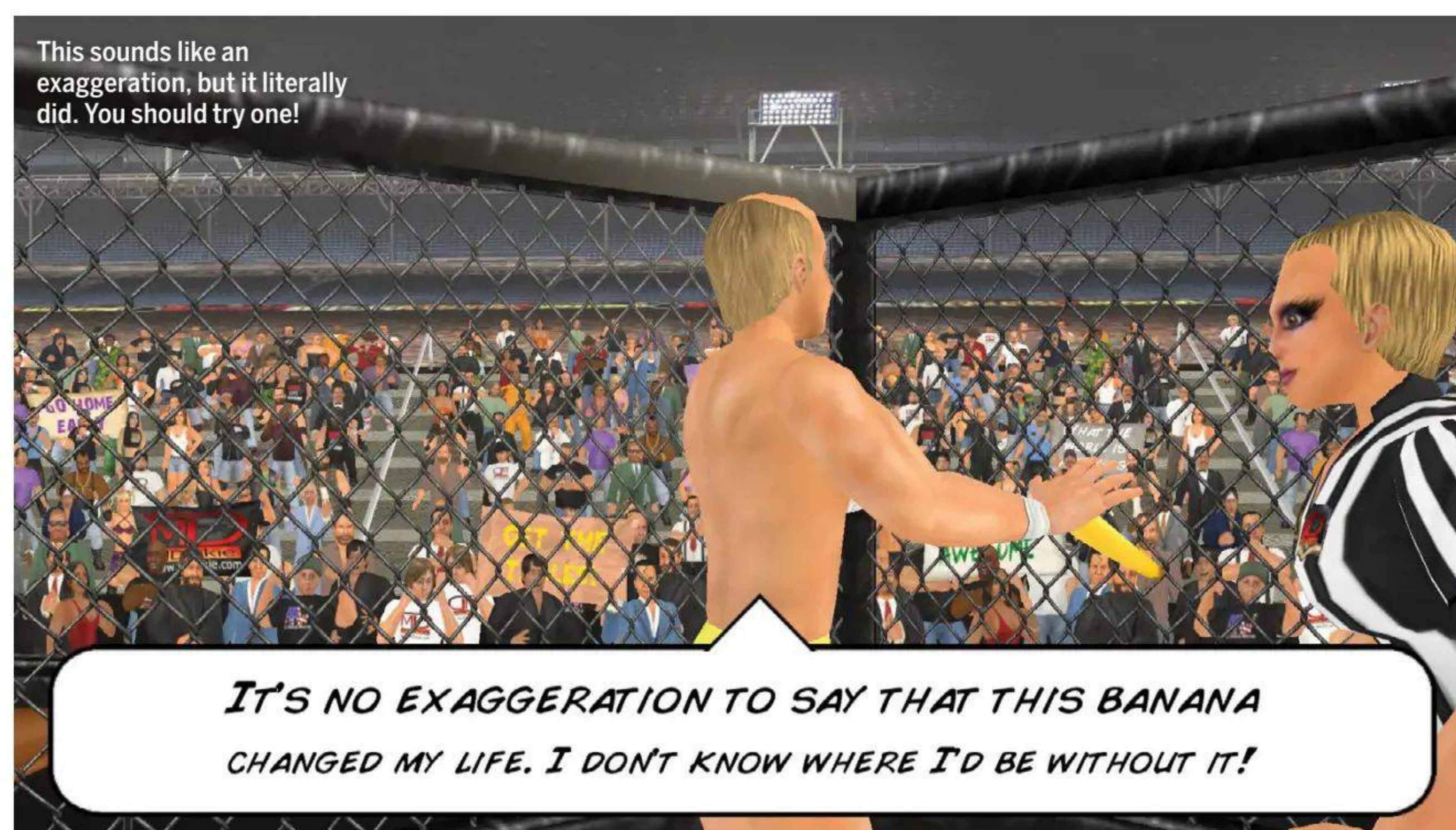
From here, things start to get even weirder. He's booked in an explosion match against Miranda Jonas. It's a spectacularly violent fight that probably takes years off both our lives. On two separate occasions, the referee accidentally blows us all up when he's hitting the mat for a three-count. Jonas eventually wins, despite me suplexing her onto a stick of dynamite. The Coinshooter also develops compelling rivalries with Greg McMahon – *Wrestling Empire's*

THE RULES

1. No shortcuts. Work your way up from the bottom.

2. No do-overs. Embrace the results, however badly it goes.

3. Money is everything, life is nothing. Make bank, crush opponents.



This sounds like an exaggeration, but it literally did. You should try one!

IT'S NO EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT THIS BANANA CHANGED MY LIFE. I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'D BE WITHOUT IT!



» take on intolerable Savile Row training dummy Conor McGregor – and Slam Dunk, who's essentially CM Punk with tattoos like scribbles on a toilet door. The latter, especially, has had a problem with The Coinshooter since the banana incident. He should probably try a calming banana tea for composure and restful sleep.

The rivalry with Slam Dunk, in fact, goes to such dangerous places that at one point I feel like this diary might end with an actual homicide. The wrestlers bump into each other in the subway, and, undeterred by the previous hit to his popularity following the fight with Federico Fisher, The Coinshooter decides to hurl Slam Dunk onto the tracks. The problem is that, thanks to *Wrestling Empire's* esoteric and unpredictable physics systems, The Coinshooter also gets clattered by an oncoming subway train. Both superstars are pulverised, and the World's Most Dangerous Dirt Fisherman ends up starting his next match against Greg McMahon with literally no health. Thank the starchy gods for the lucky banana. Dunk ends up in the hospital, and The Coinshooter decides to truly assert his dominance by visiting him there and piledriving him through a stretcher. He even has time to pick up some more illegal steroids during the altercation. Life is good.

SHARK TALE

The rivalry against Greg McMahon also comes to a disturbing conclusion when we have a Shark Tank match. This involves the entire area being flooded, and we even have to swim to the ring while our entrance music plays, which is impracticable and undignified. Luckily, The Coinshooter's banana comes equipped with a protective covering – nature's cling film – which stops it from getting wet. I presume the point of this match is to throw your opponent into the water, but, once again, we're in an MMA cage, so the watery surroundings have no bearing on the match. It does, however, mean the entire stadium is flooded until the next event, which makes navigating the backstage area a watery chore. Apart from that, it's all going well. Alarmingly well. The Coinshooter is signed on a new contract with a win bonus, and he's in the best physical shape of his life. The Flaxen Relic Recoverer should be happy, But he isn't. All

BELOW: This isn't going to end well for anyone, is it?



BANANA-RAMA!

Five fruity facts about The Coinshooter's champion snack

- 1 Bananas are a great source of potassium, which can lower blood pressure!
- 2 Their scientific name is *musa sapientum*, which means 'fruit of the wise men'.
- 3 Bananas float! Handy for Shark Tank matches
- 4 Rubbing a banana peel on a mosquito bite will help stop the itching!
- 5 Bananas can be used to polish precious metal, such as championship gold!

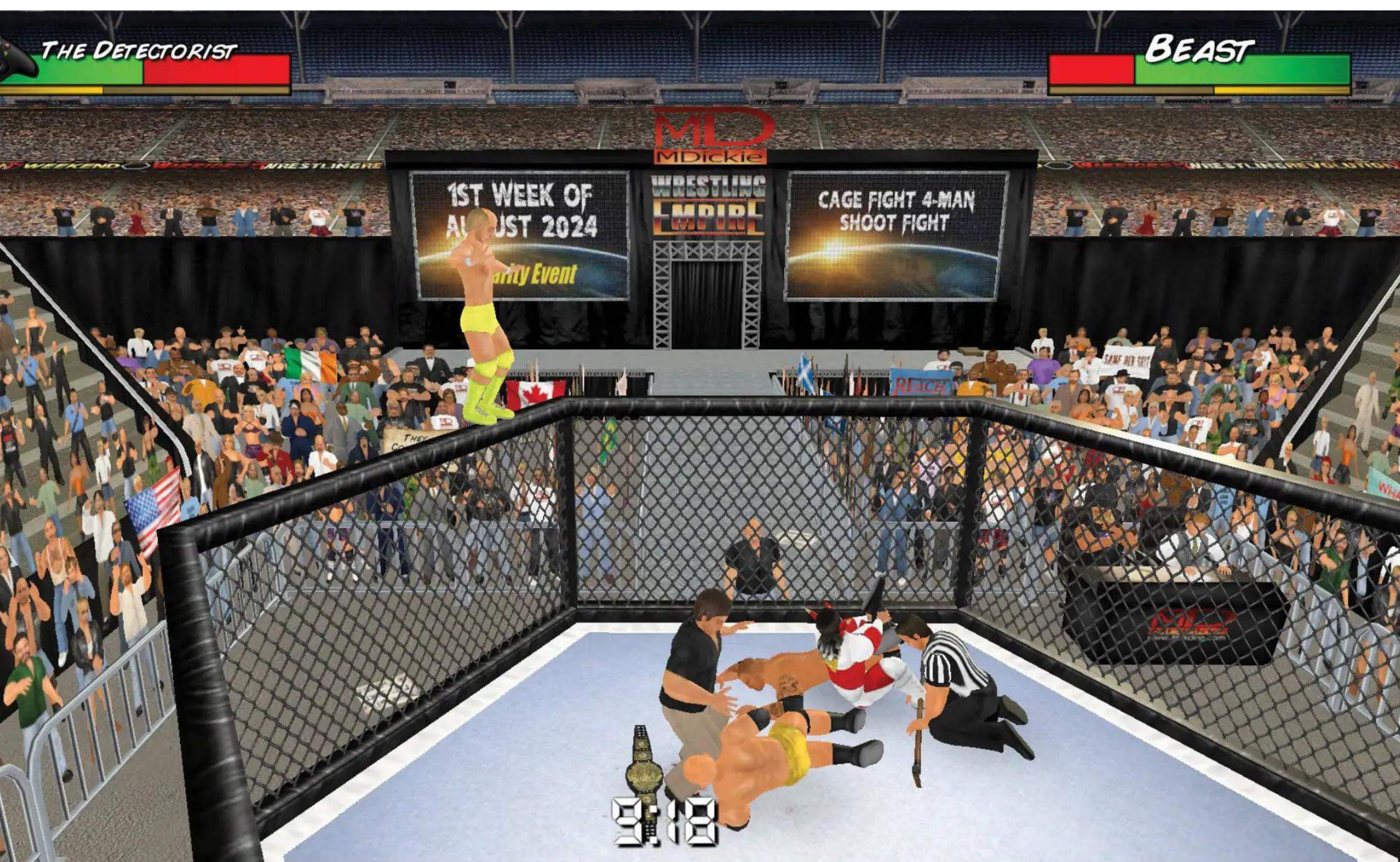


the bananas in the world are no substitute for the championship gold that still eludes him.

It's almost a relief when he's approached by Wrestling Revolution, a smaller circuit where, allegedly, one of The Coinshooter's former friends performs. He's signed on a fat contract, with a juicy \$3,100 a week, and he even has health insurance. As a British Person, this is the first time The Coinshooter has realised that he didn't have health insurance before. He forms a tag team with a new partner, Onna Bugeisha, and they form an effective pairing. They smash up most of the Wrestling Revolution opposition. They even take part in a bull rope tag match, although they end up attached to each other, which seems to slightly undermine the whole purpose of the match. Within a few weeks, they've both reached the limit of popularity at the smaller promotion. They are the biggest fish in a small shark tank.

There's another issue, too. The Wrestling Revolution booker insists that The Coinshooter wins a championship, which is entirely outside his control, given the RNG elements of *Wrestling Empire*. Also, if there's anyone who has influence over that, it's surely the person who runs the company. But this has always been The Coinshooter's ultimate goal, so he embraces the challenge. Sadly, this means saying farewell to Onna Bugeisha, since the game will keep booking us in tag matches while we're a team, and I'm not even sure that Wrestling Revolution has tag team belts. We part on good terms.

I discover, after about 20 hours of playing, that the roster screen in *Wrestling Empire* lets me speak to every wrestler in the game. Not



THE COINSHOOTER SEEKS OUT YAP MASSACRE AND DELIVERS A BEATDOWN

only does this mean that I don't have to schlep around a possibly-flooded arena, but I can also pinpoint a federation's champion and try to manufacture a rivalry. I decide that this isn't a shortcut, since I'm not actually booking matches and there's every chance the champion will tell me to do one. It takes a few attempts, but eventually, the Wrestling Revolution heavyweight champion, Yap Massacre, agrees to take on The Coinshooter a week before the deadline set for me by the booker (which, hilariously, is April 1).

IRONMAN AGE

In true WWE-style, The Coinshooter seeks out Yap Massacre backstage and delivers a beatdown. He also steals his title and heads to the ring wearing it, just to experience the heft of a championship belt around his waist. It suits him. He feels naked without it. The Coinshooter's milky dadbod deserves and requires a title. The day of the match eventually arrives, and he's booked in an Ironman match: in this case, a ten-minute fight in which the wrestler with the most pinfalls or

submissions will win once the time is up. But there's another caveat: it's an explosion match. The same type of match that almost killed The Coinshooter when he was at the Weekend Warriors.

It's sickening, preposterous violence, and for the first five minutes neither wrestler can score a fall. There are only two minutes left, and, if I'm honest, I'm starting to panic. Massacre kicks out of everything I do, and I'm not fired up enough to hit my finisher. Then, in a bizarre series of explosive events, the ref throws some dynamite out of the ring, which sets fire to a chair. And then the chair sets fire to a table. The Coinshooter powerbombs Yap Massacre through the flaming table and gets his first pinfall. He follows it up with signature move, a jackhammer he calls Throw In The Trowel, and it's basically over. He's two falls up with 30 seconds to go.

The Coinshooter has done it. He's a champion. The obsessive search for gold comes to an end. He might have won his championship on April Fool's Day, but this is no joke. Nobody will ever disrespect him again.

His first event with the belt takes place... and, amazingly, somebody has stolen his clothes. Another wrestler offers to find them for \$1,270, but The Coinshooter refuses, as the rules above dictate. This might be the biggest night of his life, but it's no excuse. The Wrestling Revolution audience has a new champion: a naked one, apparently, who carries a banana. Perhaps it's time for another rebrand. ■

ABOVE: How to avoid danger in a cage match.





STAR WARS MODS

The best way to bring Star Wars into your favourite games. *By Christopher Livingston*

Star Wars has had its ups and downs. There are good Star Wars movies and bad ones, some of the TV shows are great while others are bafflingly bad, and the same can be said for just about anything else Star Wars-related, like novels, comics and videogames. We don't all agree on what Star Wars stuff is good or bad, just that sometimes it hits the mark and other times it misses worse than a drunk, blindfolded stormtrooper.

But one thing that's always good about Star Wars is sticking it into games where it doesn't belong. Any game that takes place in space should have a Millennium Falcon in it, sci-fi combat games should always have a few stormtrooper skins, any game with a sword or even a bat should have its own

lightsaber mod. Simply adding a bit of George Lucas magic makes any game better. Heck, there are Star Wars mods for non sci-fi games like *Mount & Blade*, *Prison Architect* and even *Manor Lords*. Show me any videogame, and I'll show you a modder who looked at it and decided to cram some Star Wars related stuff into it.

HAVE A BLAST

Let's start at the best possible spot: replacing boring old guns with Star Wars blasters, armour and lightsabers. 2020's *Squad* is the realistic team-based tactical shooter that you can make beautifully unrealistic by filling it to the brim with Star Wars skins, armour, weapons, vehicles and sounds. *Galactic Contention*, a mod you'll find in the Steam Workshop, is a glorious full conversion for *Squad* that legit looks like a proper Star



CONVERT ACTION

The best full conversion mods



ENDERAL: THE SHARDS OF ORDER

A full conversion for *Skyrim* packed with quests and more.



ENTROPY: ZERO 2

Play as a Combine soldier in this surprisingly sprawling mod for *Half-Life 2*.



THE LAST DAYS OF THE THIRD AGE

Live out all your fantasies in *Mount & Blade: Warband*.



TIE FIGHTER: TOTAL CONVERSION

1994's dogfighting sim recreated in *Star Wars: X-Wing Alliance*.



TOP: Lock and load. If you load blasters, that is. I'm not sure.

RIGHT: RIP Porkins.



Wars milsim. The Clone Wars is not my favourite era of the Star Wars timeline because boy those prequels are awful, but it's hard not to get excited seeing the battlefield swarming with clone troopers and ARC-170s screaming overhead. I even like seeing those goofy old B1 battle droids despite the fact that it's impossible to take them seriously because no one in the fake history of Star Wars has even been so much as scratched by them. But in *Squad*, they absolutely work.

Speaking of robot armies, we all know *Helldivers 2* is inspired by a different sci-fi property: Starship Troopers. But Johnny Rico won't mind if you slip a bit of Star Wars into it, too. Wouldn't you feel even more like a badass bugstomper if you were running around in Mandalorian armour? Wouldn't it be cool if the extraction shuttles and super destroyers looked like they came from the Star Wars galaxy? The only tricky thing here is that *Helldivers 2* is a multiplayer game, and modding online games can be a bit perilous and puts you at risk of a ban. Since these Star Wars cosmetic items are client-side, you'll also be the only one in your matches who can see them (unless you play with friends who also have them installed). Still, the skins look great and they're just a couple of the several different Star Wars mods all made by prolific modder ToastedShoes. If you don't mind the risk, give them a try.

INTO THE STARWARSFIELD

Starfield is another no-brainer when it comes to modding in some Star Wars stuff: on day one people were already custom-building their own Millennium Falcons to cruise around the galaxy. Now there are hundreds of mods that add Star Wars ships, skins, armour sets, clothing, sound effects, and weapons into *Starfield*. It's hard to know where to start, but I really love radicalclownfriend's *UC Empire* and *Freestar Rebels* mods, which turn the two main *Starfield* factions into their Star Wars counterparts. Outfits of those faction members will be changed, so the United Colonies members will be dressed as Imperial officers, stormtroopers and shocktroopers, and Death Star personnel. The Freestar Collective will now appear

as those scrappy rebels in their orange spacesuits and Endor forest gear. The same modder has more Star Wars mods, including one that adds AT-STs (we always called them Chicken Walkers) to a bunch of locations so you can battle a properly large enemy, something generally lacking in *Starfield*.

Combine those mods with the *Imperial Armaments* mod by crozzbow, which adds a bunch of slick-looking weapons from the Star Wars universe, like blaster pistols and rifles and the Z-6 rotary cannon, and *Starfield* will start feeling like a legit Star Wars game.

GALAXY OF MODS

If you're looking for some Star Wars strategy instead of shooters, there are tons of mods to choose from. We've been hearing rumours of



STARFIELD IS A NO-BRAINER WHEN IT COMES TO MODDING

several possible new *Total War* games brewing over at Creative Assembly, and one of them may be a licensed *Total War: Star Wars* game. That'd make a lot of sense, since *Total War: Warhammer* was a success, but if you can't wait for the official game there's already a mod out there that'll keep you busy: the *Star Wars Total War* mod for *Rome: Total War*. Imperial soldiers, rebels and heroes like Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader will replace nearly all those boring Romans. Heck, you can even have an entire squad of Wookies taking the battlefield.

MEN OF STAR WARS

You can do the same to *Men of War: Assault Squad 2*, which has a mod called *Galaxy at War*. Recreate clashes from Star Wars history like the famous Battle of Hoth from *The Empire Strikes Back* and considerably less famous Battle of Geonosis from *Attack of the Clones*. Sci-fi strategy *Stellaris* is a natural fit for Star Wars, too, and the *Legacy of the Old Republic* mod has tons of maps, alien races, star systems, and of course shipsets from the Star Wars universe. Enjoy. ■



LETHAL COMPANY

Make the horror more horrifying. *By Christopher Livingston*

There's nothing more fun than jumping into a game with a bunch of friends, and that fun only increases when some of that jumping is due to jump scares. Low-fi indie game *Lethal Company* is the current co-op horror hotness, casting you and your friends as employees of a corporation that's sent you to salvage scrap from abandoned moon stations. As you scamper around in sci-fi facilities looking to meet your salvage quotas, you quickly discover why these bases were abandoned, and as always the answer is: horrifying monsters. Calamity and hilarity ensues as you watch your teammates die horribly just to bring back a coffee mug, two pickle jars and a drinks can.

Another great thing about *Lethal Company* is that it's proving to be an

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 23, 2023

DEVELOPER
Zeekerss

PUBLISHER
Zeekerss

LINK
shorturl.at/izX24

extremely flexible game when it comes to modding. Despite only being out for a few months, the co-op horror adventure has lots of mods that make it possible to wear new accessories, change the rules, and add even more horrific monsters to the already terrifying game. Plus, if you want to play with more than four players, there are mods for that too.

Let's start right there: the *More Company* mod will let you bring more friends along for the ride. Instead of just four friends you can now play with eight, and that suggests you'll have twice as much fun. If that's not already enough, the mod also includes a bunch of new



LEFT: Mods let you customise your entire game on the fly.

BELOW: Is that your friend? Or an imposter?



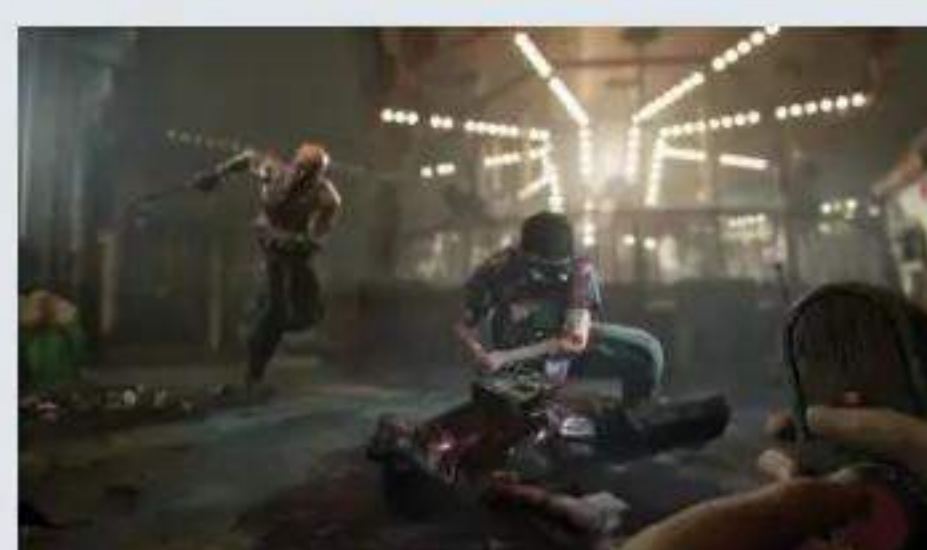
SCARE TACTICS

Other great co-op horror games



PHASMOPHOBIA

You and your fellow ghost hunters document different spectres in a haunted house.



OUTLAST TRIALS

Survive a "therapy" session in a research facility filled with murderous lunatics.



SONS OF THE FOREST

An open-world base builder doesn't seem like it would be scary... but there's evil afoot.



DEAD BY DAYLIGHT

One player is a killer like Freddy Kruger or Michael Myers, the rest are teens trying to stay alive.

cosmetics for you and your friends to wear including sunglasses, hats, cat ears, and more. If going from four to eight players isn't enough, there's another mod called *Bigger Lobby* that lets you play with... let me just double check my notes on this... yes, up to 40 players! That's absurd, but if you have 39 friends and you can't bear to leave even a single one out of your game night, I'd give it a try. You might also enjoy the mod called *Late Company*,

BELOW: Turn it into a real party by doubling the player count.

which lets you add players even after a mission has begun, so they don't have to wait for the session to end before they can join.

FRIGHT NIGHT

Now that you've got more friends playing, you may want some new ways to communicate with them. Giving them the finger, perhaps? The *More Emotes* mod not only lets you flip the bird to your buddies, but also adds a few other emotes like clapping and performing the touchdown dance The Griddy. Now when several of your friends get torn apart by monsters just so you can bring back a tea kettle and a dustpan to scrap, you can celebrate appropriately.

Speaking of monsters, *Lethal Company*'s abandoned space bases are already full of horrors, with everything from giant spiders to massive worms to flying monkeys. And there's not just sci-fi critters but supernatural ones, like a horrifying ghost girl and even a mask that if picked up can possess a player and turn them against their friends. But if things weren't already bad enough, there are mods that add to the scares.

The *Skinwalkers* mod is especially spooky, as it'll record clips of your voice chat while you're playing, then repeat them back to you, making it sound like your friends are talking when they aren't. As if it's not spooky enough hearing the disembodied voices of your friends from the darkness, it can really cause problems during the game. If you hear a friend say something like, "Where are you?" and you open your mic to answer

them, your voice may be overheard by one of the monsters.

Another mod, *Mimics*, has a different way of tricking you into dying. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, Mimics classically disguise themselves as treasure chests to lure gold-hungry adventurers into touching them, so what's the spooky space base equivalent? How about an exit door? There's no sight more welcoming than the way out of the cursed facility you're stuck inside, but occasionally that door is just a trap and anyone who opens it will be eaten by... well, by something that has a mouth the size of a door.

SCREAM MACHINE

If you're looking to make your experience more challenging than it already is, there's a mod called *Brutal Company Plus* that increases monster



THERE ARE MODS THAT ADD TO THE SCARES

spawns, makes every creature available no matter what moon you're on, and adds new randomised events that will keep you on your toes. It's customisable, too, letting you tweak your starting cash and loot drops to give you a fighting chance. Another great way to customise your *Lethal Company* experience is a mod called *GameMaster*, which lets the host decide just how much carnage and chaos they want to inflict. It comes with a built in-menu to spawn monsters at will, adjust deadlines and credits, and buy items for players. The really nice thing about this mod is that only the host needs to install it rather than everyone.

Finally, there are a couple of mods that make some sensible additions to the game. The *FOV Adjust* mod lets every PC gamer do what they always instantly want to do in games: change their FOV setting. And the *Minimap* mod adds a nice little map to the top right of your screen which will show teammates, loot, and other features, plus it can be toggled on and off and resized while you're playing. To find these mods (and many more) check out the Nexus Mods page or mod depository Thunderstore. ■





FALLOUT SHOW MODS

Modders let you bring the TV show into your Fallout games. *By Christopher Livingston*

It's official: not only is the Fallout TV show surprisingly good, it's a certified hit. Millions of people watched Fallout's first season when it arrived on Prime TV in April, and they enjoyed it so much it led to a resurgence in people playing the Fallout games. *Fallout 4* rocketed up the Steam charts to become one of the most played games of the month, *Fallout 76* broke its own record for most concurrent players on Steam, and even *Fallout 3* saw a big increase in player count.

Makes sense to me. Just seeing Lucy fiddle with her Pip-Boy in the first episode made me want to jump back into the game, and that feeling only grew stronger as I watched Max stomping around (and crushing skulls) in his power armour and the Ghoul blasting his enemies into glop

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Nov 10, 2015

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

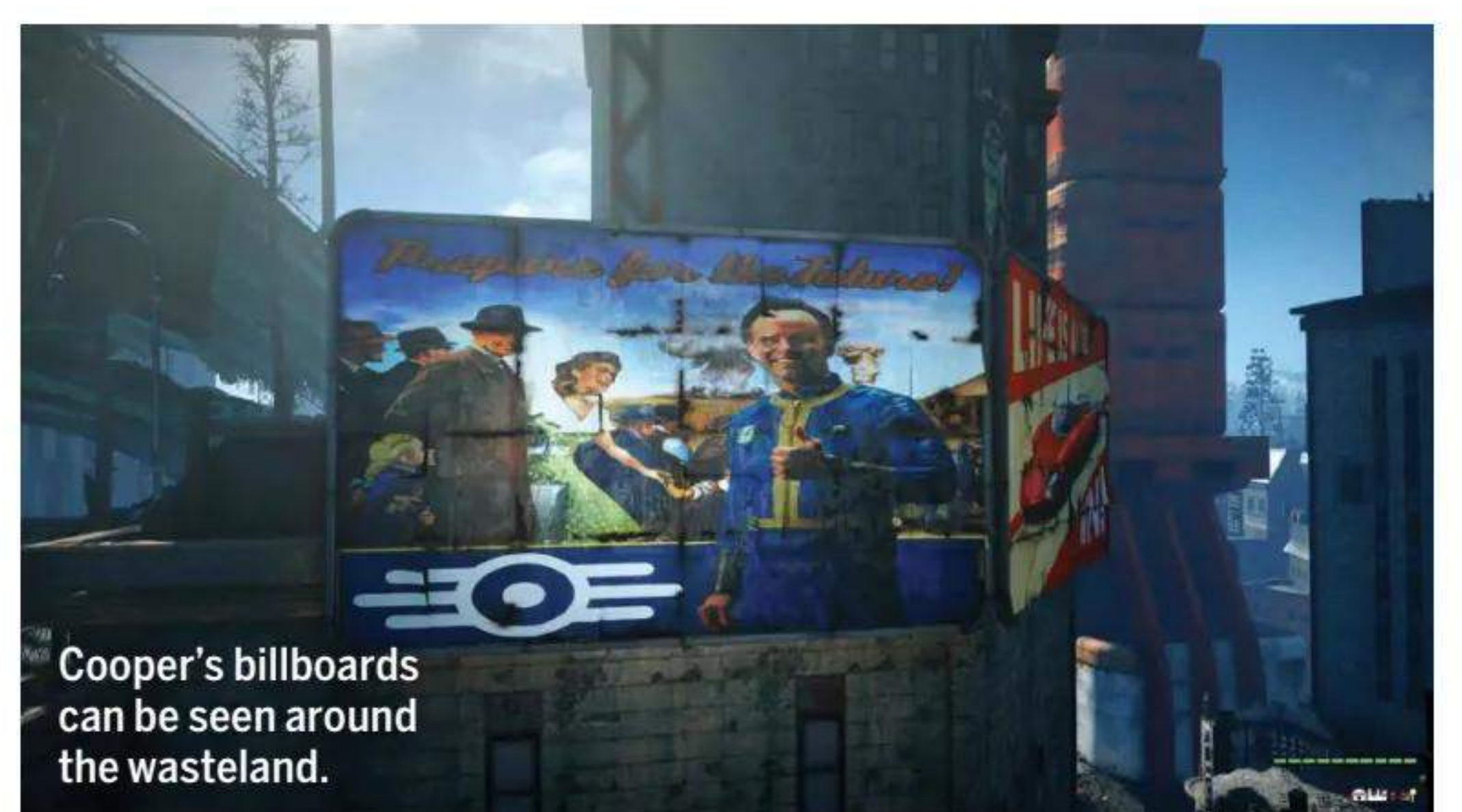
LINK
fallout.bethesda.net

in slow-motion, an obvious callout to VATS and the Bloody Mess perk.

But if you're going to jump back into a *Fallout* game, you're gonna want to bring some mods with you, and modders have been busy bringing elements from the show into the various *Fallout* games, from weapons to billboards to Vault jumpsuits to character presets that will let you play as your three favourite characters from the show. War never changes, but games do, thanks to modders.

GHOUL SCHOOL

There are lots of menu presets for the main characters of Lucy and



Cooper's billboards can be seen around the wasteland.



LOOK 4 IT

Here are the best four locations to visit



THE USS CONSTITUTION

Near Bunker Hill you'll find robots trying to fix a frigate. Help 'em and enjoy one of the best quests.



CABOT HOUSE

In the rusting ruins of Boston, what's up with this immaculate mansion in Beacon Hill?



HUBRIS COMICS

This store in Back Bay is hiding all sorts of goodies, including a legit superhero costume.



THE CRASHED UFO

You'll have to be level 20 before it arrives, but you'll find the crash site and some otherworldly fun.



ABOVE: Play as pre-war Cooper in style.

RIGHT: Pay your respects to Shady Sands in New Vegas.



Max, but if I'm gonna go back into *Fallout 4* again, I'm gonna do it as the Ghoul. It's always been a bit of a shame that Bethesda's *Fallout* RPGs don't let you play as a ghoul character when they're some of the most interesting people in the games. The *Revamped Playable Ghoul Mod* by cebius2 will let you leave your smooth skin behind and step into the shoes of a ghoul. You'll even enjoy the radiation immunity that ghouls have in the game. And if you want to play as the Ghoul from the show, look no further than the *Cooper the Ghoul Howard* mod by Jonin1433. Better yet, keep your options open with the *Vault Girl Recreations - Cooper Howard mod*: it does a damn fine job of recreating both versions of Cooper Howard: the dapper and debonair pre-war Coop, and the craggy (but still pretty much a smokeshow) 200-year-old bounty hunter known as the Ghoul. Of course, you'll have to do the Ghoul's voice yourself, but that's part of the fun.

Since you're stalking the wasteland as a ghoul with a tortured past, it'll help to be reminded of Cooper's backstory from time to time. In the show he was a spokesman for Vault-Tec, starring in their advertisements and appearing on billboards, so the *Cooper Howard Billboard* mod by MrBloodjack brings that to life in *Fallout 4*. As you explore the Commonwealth you'll occasionally see faded ads for Vault-Tec starring Cooper, giving his now-famous thumbs-up. You'll even find some movie posters from the Western films he starred in before the bombs fell.

OKEY DOKEY

If you're more interested in emulating the ultra-positive Vault dweller Lucy, you've got some options as well. While I haven't seen any character presets that look all that faithful to Ella Purnell, the actor who plays Lucy, there's still a few Lucy-based mods to enjoy. When Lucy first begins her journey by leaving Vault 33, she's got a handy blue and yellow backpack, and QwibQwibMods has brought that to *Fallout 4* with the *Lucy's Vault-Tec Backpack* mod. The pack isn't just sharp-looking, it also adds 25 pounds to your carry weight, and you can even upgrade it at your armour workbench. There's also a brown

version unbranded by a Vault number if you'd prefer, and a retexture by modder ModishNouns lets you replace the Vault 111 logo with Lucy's Vault number, 33. Pretty cool.

Even more exciting is Lucy's pistol. In the show she carries a single-shot tranquilliser dart gun that she puts to use pretty effectively – until she runs into the Ghoul, who's pretty resistant to anything less than a boatload of chems. Veteran *Fallout* modder Neeher started working on Lucy's gun before the show even aired, based on just a photo of it in a *Vanity Fair* article, and now you can use it yourself in *Fallout 4* with the *Select Blaster* mod. And it's got a few improvements to boot.

The blaster's primary function is as a syringer that fires a single tranq dart, and you can craft custom ammo for it at your workbench. But



THERE ARE LOTS OF MENU PRESETS FOR THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Neeher decided to give the weapon a few more features. The blaster can also be used as an energy weapon, and there are different cosmetic barrels and grips that don't mess with its stats. You can even find legendary versions of the blaster once you've reached level 15.

THROUGH VEGAS

When it comes to other *Fallout* games, like Obsidian's *Fallout: New Vegas*, there aren't quite as many mods to pick from, but there are a few. Modder Chad Nobark thoughtfully added a memorial to mark the fall of an iconic location from *Fallout* lore that makes up a big plot point in the TV series. Or if you're feeling a little less respectful, you can desecrate the memorial by attacking it, which will anger a soldier named Kowalski (the mod replaces an existing monument to the battle of Hoover Dam).

For something a little more festive, modder MrDeeAr added in several jumpsuits belonging to the Vaults shown in the TV series: 31, 32, 33, and 4, and you can wear them around in New Vegas. Simple. Classy. Effective. ■



SHAME OF SKYRIM

Killing random bandits and warlocks? Feels bad, man. *By Christopher Livingston*

Bandits. Vampires. Necromancers. Warlocks. Soldiers. In a game like *Skyrim*, the one thing they all have in common is that... they're common. They're so common they don't even have names, unless a very cruel parent once looked down at the swaddled baby in their arms and named him Bandit Plunderer.

In *Skyrim*, these random no-name entities are there to give the world a little filler, attack you on secluded paths, lie in wait inside crumbling towers and dank caverns, or make snide remarks as you stroll around a city. If you kill one, or a hundred, it's not something you feel bad about. It's not like these jerks have families, friends and elaborate stories. Right?

Except now they do with a mod called *Shame of Skyrim*. Thanks to a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 11, 2011

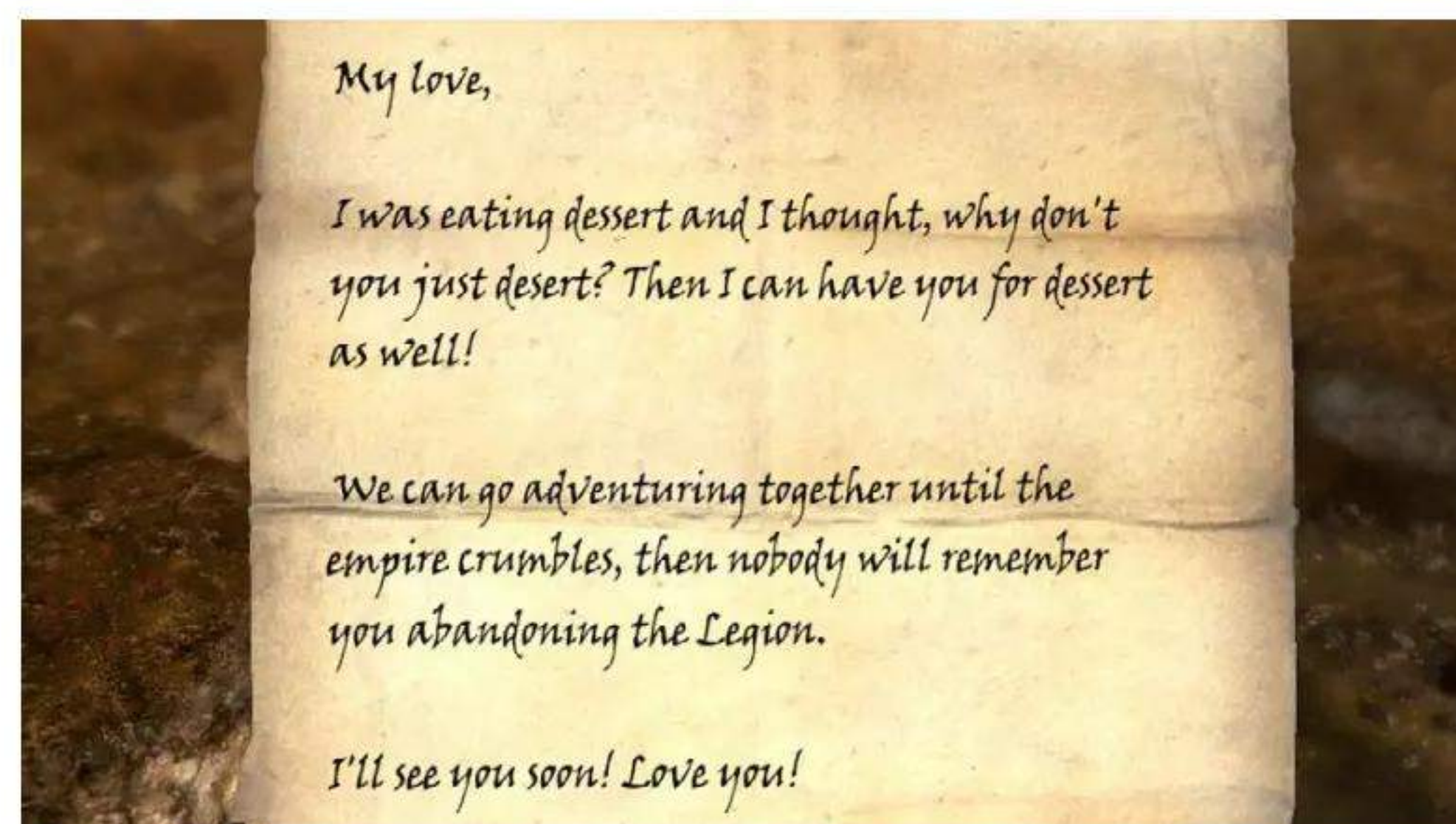
DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
elderscrolls.bethesda.net

modder named Frib (inspired by a mod request from Reddit user Formerly_Blue), the next nameless bandit you kill might have a personal note among the gold coins, gems, random potions, and lockpicks in their inventory. And that note might make you feel bad about killing them. Like, really bad.

I installed the mod (it requires another mod, *Spell Perk Item Distributor*, or *SPID*, to work, and both mods can be found at Nexus Mods) and went out into the world to murder people and see what kind of notes they're carrying. It's far from the worst thing I've ever done in *Skyrim*, but I'd say murdering people



OFFICE SPACE

There are several mods that will immerse the Dragonborn... in paperwork



9-TO-5 OFFICE JOB MOD

Yep, trade in your sword for a quill and work a desk job at a pub in Whiterun. Weirdly fun.



SKALD'S MAIL

Rent mailboxes across Skyrim and get all your letters and scrolls delivered there.



BETTER COURIER

Gives the courier his own home. You can visit him there. Or murder him.



ADVENTURER'S SKETCHBOOK

Just like Arthur Morgan in RDR2, you can now draw the places you visit in your journal.

just to see if someone wrote them a letter is right up there.

The mod gives groups like bandits, forsworn, Imperial and Stormcloak soldiers, vampires, thalmor – pretty much any faction that has random, unnamed members in it – about a 10 to 15% chance to be carrying a note, though you can increase or decrease that chance by editing the mod's .ini file. It didn't take me too long to find one: I headed to Swindler's Den, a cave that the swindlers probably should have named something less obvious, and killed the bandit standing guard outside. Then I killed all his buddies inside, eventually finding one with a note.

"Your brother has fallen in a battle with the Stormcloaks," it read. "I know you two have grown apart over the last few years, but I figured you should know. I hope you're doing well, wherever you are. Please know that we will always love you." Yep. Right in the feels. This dead, unnamed bandit suddenly has a past – a family rift, a slain brother, and worried parents. Just a few lines on a note and he's not just a rando, he's a human being. A dead human being, because I killed him. Darn.

RETURN TO SENDER

Up at Traitor's Post I cut my way through another group of bandits. "Pay us 500 gold or we'll pay your family a visit," a note on one of the dead bandits reads. Ah. Well, this explains why he was a bandit – he had no choice. He was trying to protect his family. Now he's dead and... so are they.

So notes are 'undelivered' meaning the bandit you find them on wrote them but hasn't had a chance to pop them in the post yet. "Hello niece," a note I find on a bandit I just burned to death reads, "I love you very much and I miss you! I'll try to visit as soon as I can!"

This is grim. I'm stalking the world killing people just to read their letters. I have a half-dozen in my pocket now, like some sort of tragic souvenirs. I'm like a reverse mailman who also happens to be a horrible murderer. At least after stabbing a

Stormcloak to death I find a letter that's not so heartbreaking, "I'm very sorry to hear of your struggles to sleep. I've added a satchel of herbs that should help with that. Just put a pinch of that onto a small flame and inhale the smoke, it'll help you rest."

Another soldier has a note imploring him to desert his duties, "Break a leg, steal a horse, I don't know, just get out. I don't want to lose you." Well, you just lost him. And that's followed by a real kick in the gut when I pummel a bandit outlaw to death with a mace, "Our son has passed away. The funeral was a few days ago. I thought you should know, all things considered. Don't come and visit, you are still not and never will be welcome again."

NOTE TO STEALTH

I hate to say this, but these notes



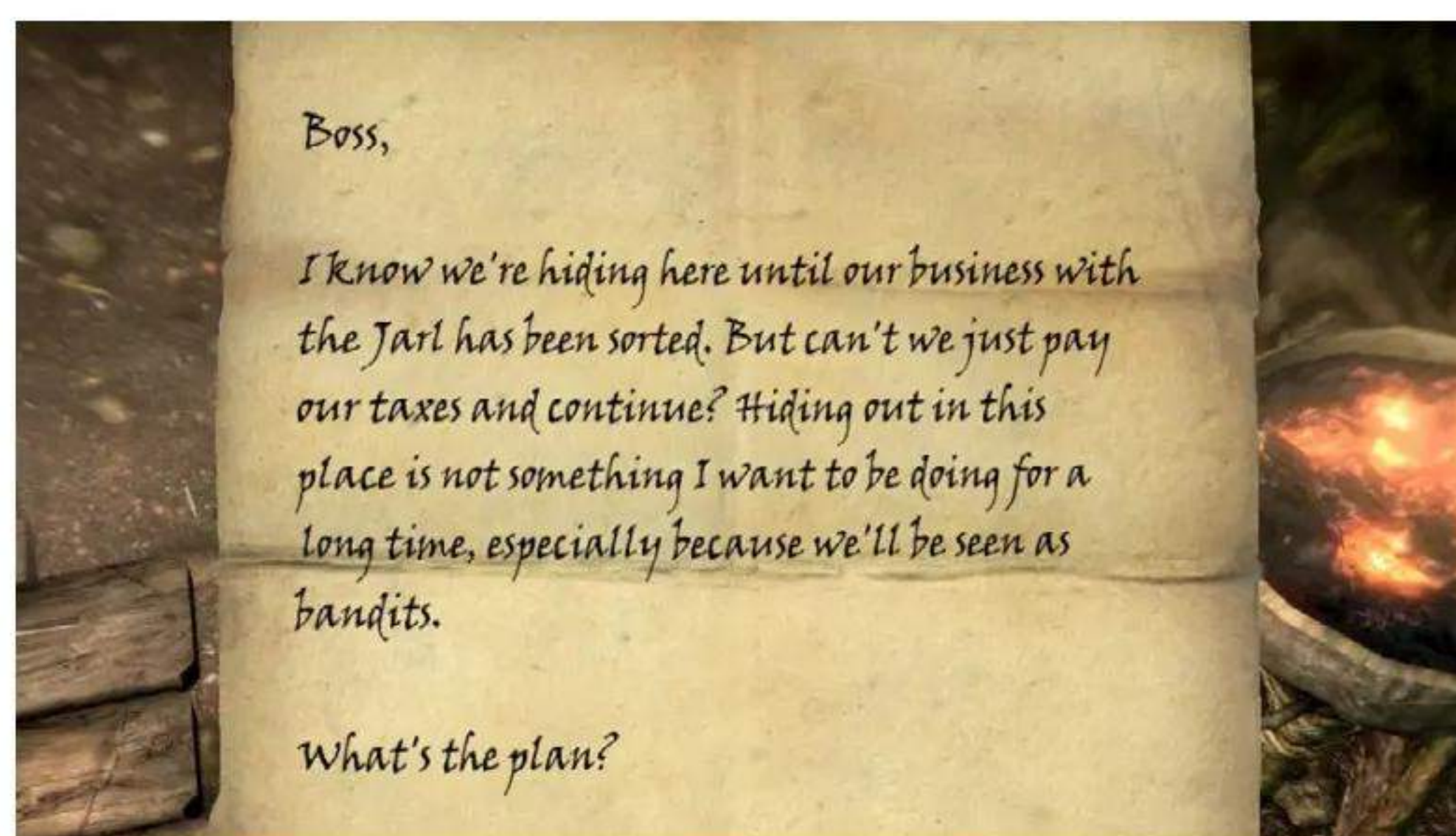
THIS DEAD, UNNAMED BANDIT SUDDENLY HAS A PAST

are really making it hard to enjoy my murder spree. It finally occurs to me that... oh, right, I don't have to murder everyone just to read their notes. I can also use stealth and pickpocket their personal correspondence. It's something I'm actually quite good at! After skulking around Whiterun and snooping in several guards' pockets, though, I kind of lose interest in stealing mail. Reading a sad note I've stolen from someone while they're still alive just doesn't pack the same emotional punch.

So, I go back to killing. Up at Knifepoint ridge, some bandits try to crush me with a rock trap and fill me full of arrows. Unfortunately for them, I came here to read notes and chew Nirnroot and I'm all out of Nirnroot.

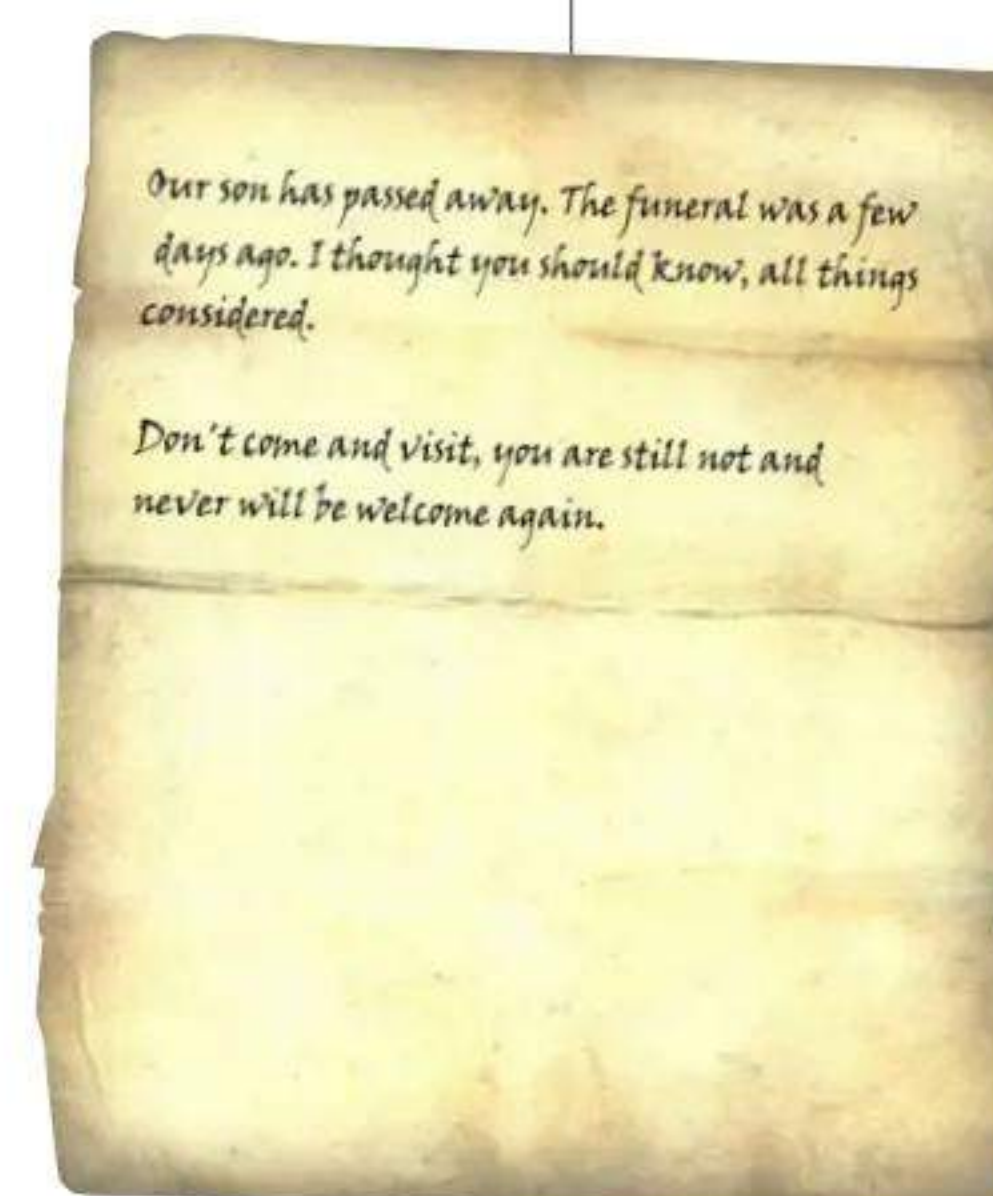
They die, on fire, but while I scorch their flesh the notes in their pockets are preserved.

One reads, "Dear Bandit. I forgive you." That's nice. I just wonder if all of these dead bandits will forgive me. ■



TOP: Never put off sending a letter.

RIGHT: This dead guy was boring. Now he's interesting.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



GRIM FANDANGO

Death is a slave to the city in LucasArts' last great adventure. *By Ian Evenden*

Byond death, in Tim Schafer's world at least, there is only bureaucracy. Supernatural mythologies often reflect the human experience, and the afterlife – or at least, one of the afterlives – being a corporate hellscape filled with message tubes, secretaries and filing cabinets that you can never leave until your debt is paid off seems to be trying awfully hard to make a point about our existence. Office drudgery never ends, the ones at the top are the only ones to prosper, and yes I am writing this as my last job just before a trip to Disneyland. Why do you ask?

However, this is hardly the only game to delight in the tedious. The first act of *Return to Monkey Island* involves finding a mop so you can become the

lowest of the low on a pirate ship, while being an overworked bartender is something that dates back to gaming's earliest days. In *Grim Fandango* the feelings of despair and hopelessness experienced by Manny Calavera are not those of a damned soul but of one in purgatory, as he is hoping to work off his 'debt' through good deeds and enter a heavenly afterlife. If it exists, of course. Manny is not above existentialist pondering on whether the Land of Eternal Rest is even real, and whether all we have is the here and now.

Calavera, like most of the inhabitants of the Land of the Dead, is a calaca, a representation of the human skeleton used as a decoration during the Mexican Day of the Dead festival, el Día de los Muertos. The word calavera is Spanish for skull, but this Mexican influence is only on the surface. Below, it's all film noir, from

the double bass in the score to the wide suits characters wear (including a perfect Casablanca dinner jacket) to the smoking (though the manual wryly notes that all the smokers in the game are dead). There's colour and art deco and the feeling of a party, especially as the game takes place on four particular days, each a year apart. It's always the Day of the Dead in *Grim Fandango*, and there's always something to celebrate.

DEAD AND LOVING IT

This mix of influences is a perfect match. The world of *Grim Fandango* is the eighth level in a hierarchy that

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1998/2015

DEVELOPER
LucasArts

PUBLISHER
LucasArts

LINK
grimremastered.com

BELOW: The inventory system feels slow and clunky.



This actually wouldn't be a bad place to work.

has at least nine, the Land of the Dead that newly departed souls must cross in skeleton form in order to reach the ninth Land of Eternal Rest. There's definitely a hell dimension too, though we're not told its number (perhaps Manny is in it), nor exactly what happens in levels one to six, nor the Land of the Living's position in the stack. The way you cross the Land of the Dead depends on your actions in life. The best of us get a train ride, others a sports car or cruise liner. Most are left to walk, which takes four years, and may be assisted by a walking stick as one poor unfortunate is offered at the

game's beginning. Manny Calavera is a travel agent dressed as the grim reaper in a big cloak and stilts to make him taller. His job is to match the recently departed to the travel method they can use to depart further. He has a debt to pay off, his indentured servitude a punishment for unspecified past crimes, and needs to sell more exclusive travel packages to deserving souls, yet has noticed that these never seem to come his way. He's not a bad guy, but he's operating in a bad system, where organised crime has its beak in the bowl just as it did in the noir thrillers of the 1940s and '50s.

THERE'S PLENTY OF SCHAFER HUMOUR TO CUT THE JET-BLACK ATMOSPHERE

You see this in the way he manipulates, schemes, blackmails and lies to get what he needs. There's plenty of Schafer humour to cut the jet-black atmosphere, such as when security guard Carla unloads on Manny about her unhappy life, and he takes advantage of her sadness and self-absorption just so he can bypass a metal detector. The existence of Manny's casino in the Rubacava chapter opens up questions about the world – if all the people here are on a journey to the next world, and are supposed to be walking or taking trains, how do they have time to gamble, flirt and drink their way through the nights? If the skeletal pigeons can lay eggs, does that mean the humans can get pregnant with skeleton babies? Sometimes it's best not to ask.

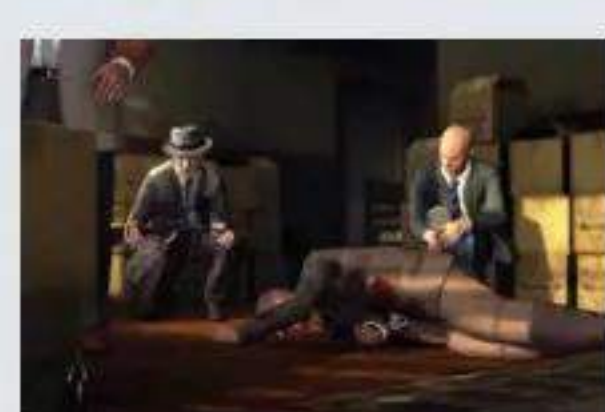


STYLE IT OUT

The funny thing about playing *Grim Fandango* in 2024 is how slow it feels. >>

FURTHER ADVENTURES IN NOIR

More games with hard-boiled style



LA NOIRE
What could be more noir than a '40s detective scrutinising dames with something to hide?



DISCWORLD NOIR
This original Pratchett story blends vampires and the City Watch with nods to Casablanca.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE
The style of this 2013 release sets it up for some detective work, then the arena battles let it down.



UNDER A KILLING MOON
Roughly contemporaneous with *Grim Fandango*, its 3D environments haven't aged so well.



BELOW: PC Gamer Towers has nothing on this place.



» Movement is clunky, and although you can click twice to run this seems out of keeping with the noir setting. Humphrey Bogart never jogged like he was late for a bus. The walking around and talking, by choosing lines of dialogue from a list on the screen, is the same way things work in *Baldur's Gate III*, but backtracking through the opening building to get a work order that means Glottis can carry out alterations to a car so it can accommodate his bulk and he can become your driver makes for a drawn-out opening, especially as characters say the same thing every time you interact with them. Thankfully the script is tight and snappy, its exposition through words typical of the film noir the game is indebted to just like Manny is to whatever powers rule his world.

Grim Fandango runs on the GrimE engine, which pre-renders static backdrops over which character models move like an early *Resident Evil* game. Being from 1998, massive screen resolutions can't be assumed, so everything feels slightly too big on a modern display. You expect to see more of the world around the edges, instead of being hemmed into a tight field of view with a massive mouse cursor. Ah yes, the mouse. *Grim Fandango* broke with LucasArts tradition by originally not using the mouse for movement, expecting players to use a keyboard, joystick (how retro!) or gamepad. For a PC game with no visual interface this feels like a strange decision, as this more console-centric control scheme is odd in a game that wouldn't see a

ABOVE: The Land of the Living is a weird place.

PlayStation until the PS4. Perhaps *Full Throttle* or *Sam & Max Hit the Road* had it right, mouse-driven but with a minimum of on-screen clutter, a step forward from previous games that took up half the screen with verbs and inventory. As it is, you can search the screen for interactive objects by spamming the cursor about, you just can't use it to walk there unless you're playing the remastered version, and the game relies on Manny's head to indicate their position. Objects too close to others can be missed, and the way they blend in with the backgrounds mean some, like the pack of cards at the game's beginning that tells us so much about Manny himself, can be walked straight past.

The fixed boxy aspect ratio also adds to the feeling of a game out of

LUCASARTS TIMELINE *Where does Grim Fandango fit?*



1987
Maniac Mansion



1990
The Secret of Monkey Island



1993
Day of the Tentacle



1995
Full Throttle



1998
Grim Fandango



2009
The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition



2015
Grim Fandango Remastered



time, designed for 4:3 TVs just as widescreen was about to become popular. The aspect ratio is so firmly embedded in the game that the remastered edition's 16:9 mode just stretches the picture to fill the gaps, offering a choice of black or patterned bars if you prefer the original. You're not meant to see more of the world than you're shown, and the remaster respects this decision even if it does make tweaks to the lighting and character models, though this has led to a strange quirk where the prerendered cutscenes look far worse than in-engine moments.

THE NAKED CITY

The backdrops are key to many of the game's puzzles, so you'll be scrutinising them, especially as you

MARKS THE END OF THE GREAT AGE OF LUCASARTS ADVENTURES

try to work out where a particular photo was taken from. Luckily, they don't look too bad after 25 years, and there are some absolute gems in this low-res treasure chest, including a skyscraper with an escape route made of ties, a cat-racing track, and the way your demon driver Glottis squeezes his enormous bulk out of a tiny office that he must, surely, take up every spare millimetre of.

And yet, despite all its brilliance, *Grim Fandango* marks the end of the great age of LucasArts adventures. Its land of the dead didn't attract buyers' souls in the numbers required, and despite winning awards the company moved on, deciding *Star Wars* shooters and *KOTOR* were a better bet following the success of *Dark Forces*. It was game director Tim Schafer's final project for LucasArts, and while 2000's *Escape From Monkey Island* also used the GrimE engine, *Full Throttle* sequels *Payback* and *Hell on Wheels* were cancelled

and *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* looked set to cap the company's remarkable point 'n' click run before being canned itself in 2004. It was a sad end for a line of games that had burned so brightly, but its revival through the games it inspired, along with remakes and new sequels, shows that having the minds who made *Grim Fandango* and its stablemates spread out in the industry was a long-term positive, even though it meant short-term pain.

Playing *Grim Fandango* today, especially if you've never encountered it before, is a funny experience. The initial culture shock of encountering a game that's so unlike its forebears in so many ways, and which will defy the expectations of modern players too, wears off pretty soon, as does the common criticism of having to do bizarre things in the right order to proceed. It's always been the act of wandering around, talking to NPCs, and slowly figuring out the clues that's been at the core of these games. The strength of the art, script and voice acting soon takes over to provide a satisfying adventure through a world that's just as distinctive now as it was all that time ago. ■



2016
Day of the Tentacle
Remastered



2017
Full Throttle
Remastered



SYNDICATE

Playing Bullfrog's tactical masterpiece after 30 years out of the boardroom. *By Ian Evenden*

Syndicate is a game that stirs strong feelings within me, and the realisation that it's now 30 years old plunged me into a pit of nostalgia for my teenage years.

I've owned *Syndicate* four times, and played it on three different platforms. Three were on PC, the game coming as a selection of floppies in a big black box with a bright green sheath around it, then a CD-ROM in a small green cardboard case, then as a download in its *Syndicate Plus* incarnation. Only the last one still works. I also played it on the Amiga 500, and later the PSP port of the Super Nintendo conversion as part of the dreadful EA Replay disc. It's a game that's most at home on PC, however, as even in 1993 the MS-DOS version

was better than those seen on the Amiga and Atari ST.

For the sake of clarity, we're talking about *Syndicate* the Bullfrog cyberpunk tactics game. Not the 2012 Starbreeze FPS of the same name whose main character, Miles Kilo, sounds like the friendly face of a '70s animation explaining why the switch to the metric system isn't scary rather than a cybernetically enhanced agent of corporate terror. That game is, however, notable for the voice of *Succession*'s Brian Cox as a CEO who prefers to dish out trauma ballistically rather than generationally.

When you're 14, you haven't seen *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* hasn't been invented yet, the idea of cybernetic agents in trenchcoats walking into a near-future city and setting fire to its inhabitants seems impossibly cool. The intro to 1996 sequel *Syndicate Wars* captured it



best, unaware civilians living in an illusory world of sunny tree-lined avenues with friendly police while, in reality, there are cybernetic killers with miniguns on the streets. The cops are masked stormtroopers. And it's raining.

Syndicate's intro is a simpler thing, though it's aged better as its characters don't appear to be made out of plasticine. It tells the tale of a capture operation, a potential agent (known as BOB after the game's internal development title at Bullfrog) run down, bundled into a car and turned into a cyborg. I thought my PC couldn't handle it at

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 6, 1993

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER
Bullfrog Productions

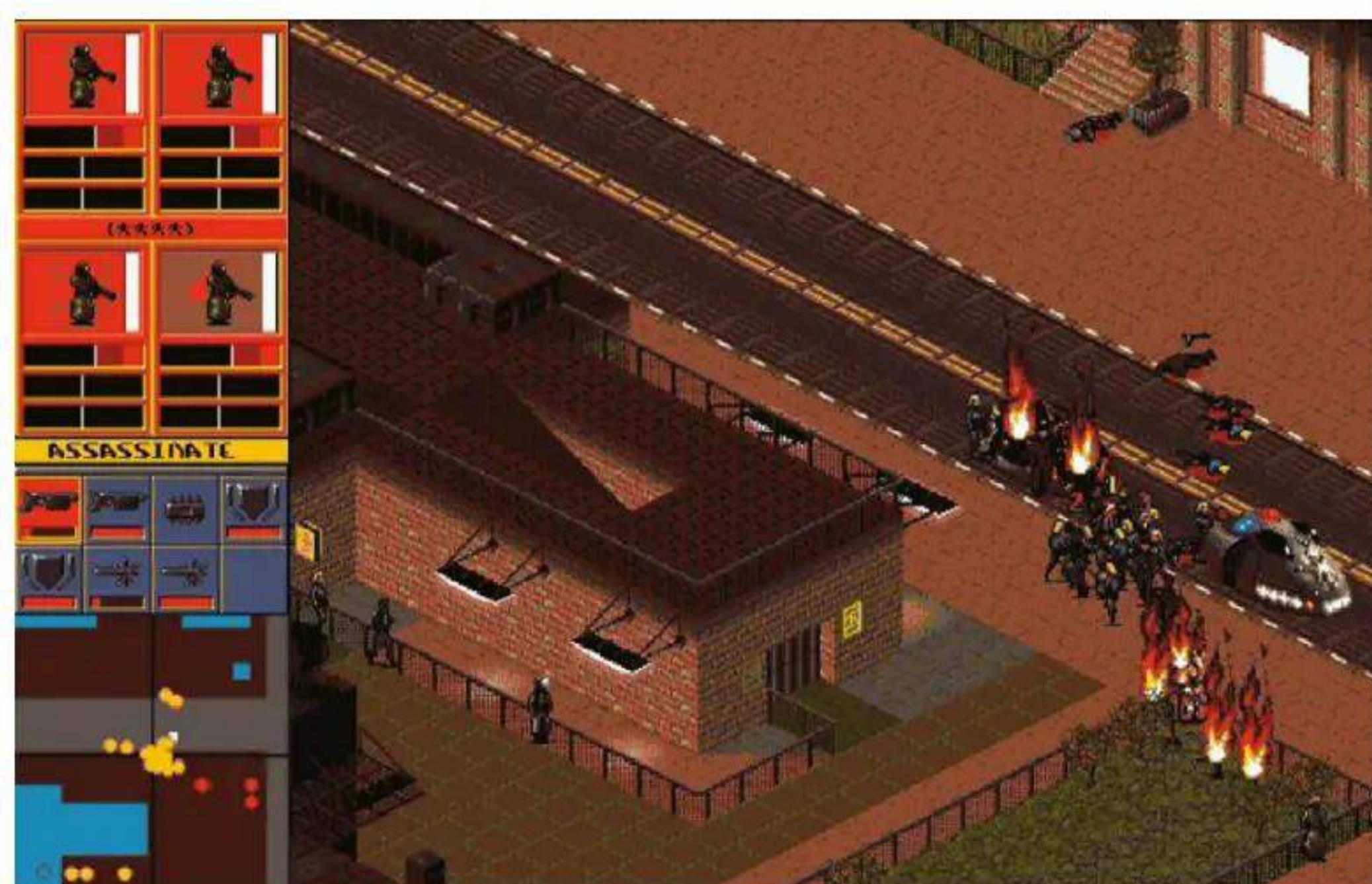
LINK
gog.com



I've never noticed the googly eyes at the top of the Leonardo Device before.

ABOVE: Some levels have trains you can catch. They'll run you over just as easily though.

RIGHT: Flamers and lasers can cause explosive car-nage.



REIGN OF FIRE

Playing Syndicate on modern PCs



Syndicate got a spiritual sequel in 2015 in the form of *Satellite Reign*, a game co-created by one of the original team behind *Syndicate Wars* at Bullfrog, and which also shared the '90s games' composer.

It's probably a better match for modern systems, and is extremely *Blade Runner*, taking *Syndicate*'s isometric look and turning the sliders marked 'neon' and 'rain' to their maximum. There's four-player co-op too, which is a great addition to the game.

If you've got a disc copy of the game laying around, you can also try out FreeSynd on SourceForge. It's a game engine recreation of the original that requires the game's data files to run. It's also a labour of love project that's been on hold for four years and never reached version 1.0, but it's nice that it exists.

the time, such was the jerkiness as the camera rose over the West Gate to show the Eurocorp building beyond. It's good to see it's still choppy 30 years later, on a significantly more powerful AMD APU, and my 386SX is vindicated.

A NEW EMPIRE

And then it all comes rushing back, like a blast of perception drugs to the brain. The futuristic green interface that appears to be projected into the air on a monitor made of jelly you can throw a lamp through. The

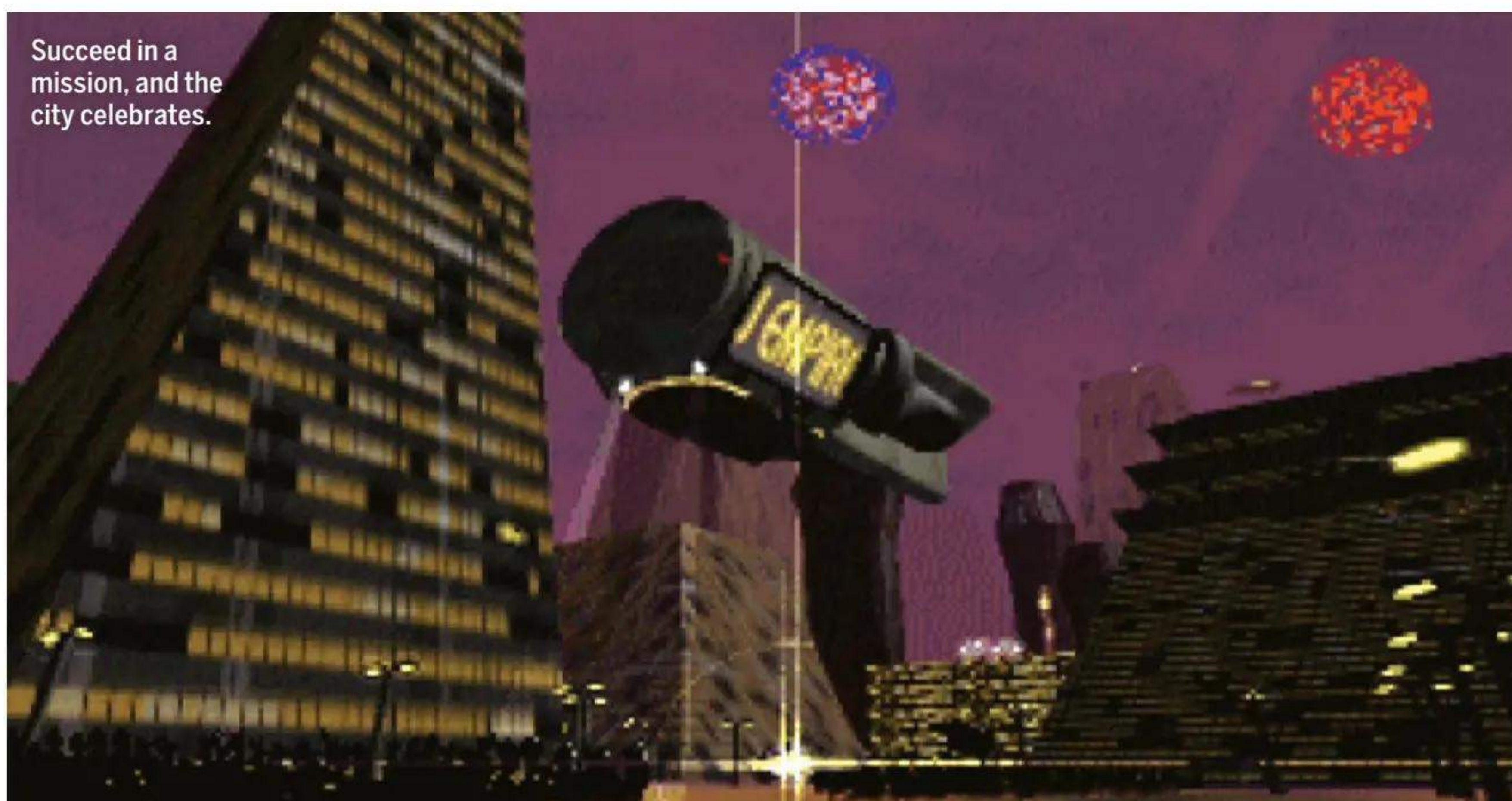
IT ALL COMES RUSHING BACK, LIKE A BLAST OF PERCEPTION DRUGS TO THE BRAIN

screen in which you dress naked cybernetic operatives in their finest upgraded body parts. And the map, broken up into zones of corporate control. Countries flash when a mission is available so you, the skybound marketing director, can extend the benevolent influence of your corporation by means of rocket launcher-assisted assassination, hails of bullets and injecting people with mind-controlling drugs. The robotic voice that says "syndicate" every time you click on the interface during a mission can get in the bin, though.

One of my favourite missions is the combat sweep in the Urals, which drops not too long after the beginning of the game. You start on top of a building, moving down to the ground to explore – the maps are 2D, but with enough of a 3D effect to make you believe there are different levels. The enemy agents are ready for you, and come running armed with Uzis. There's only eight of them, but if you're not prepared the hail of

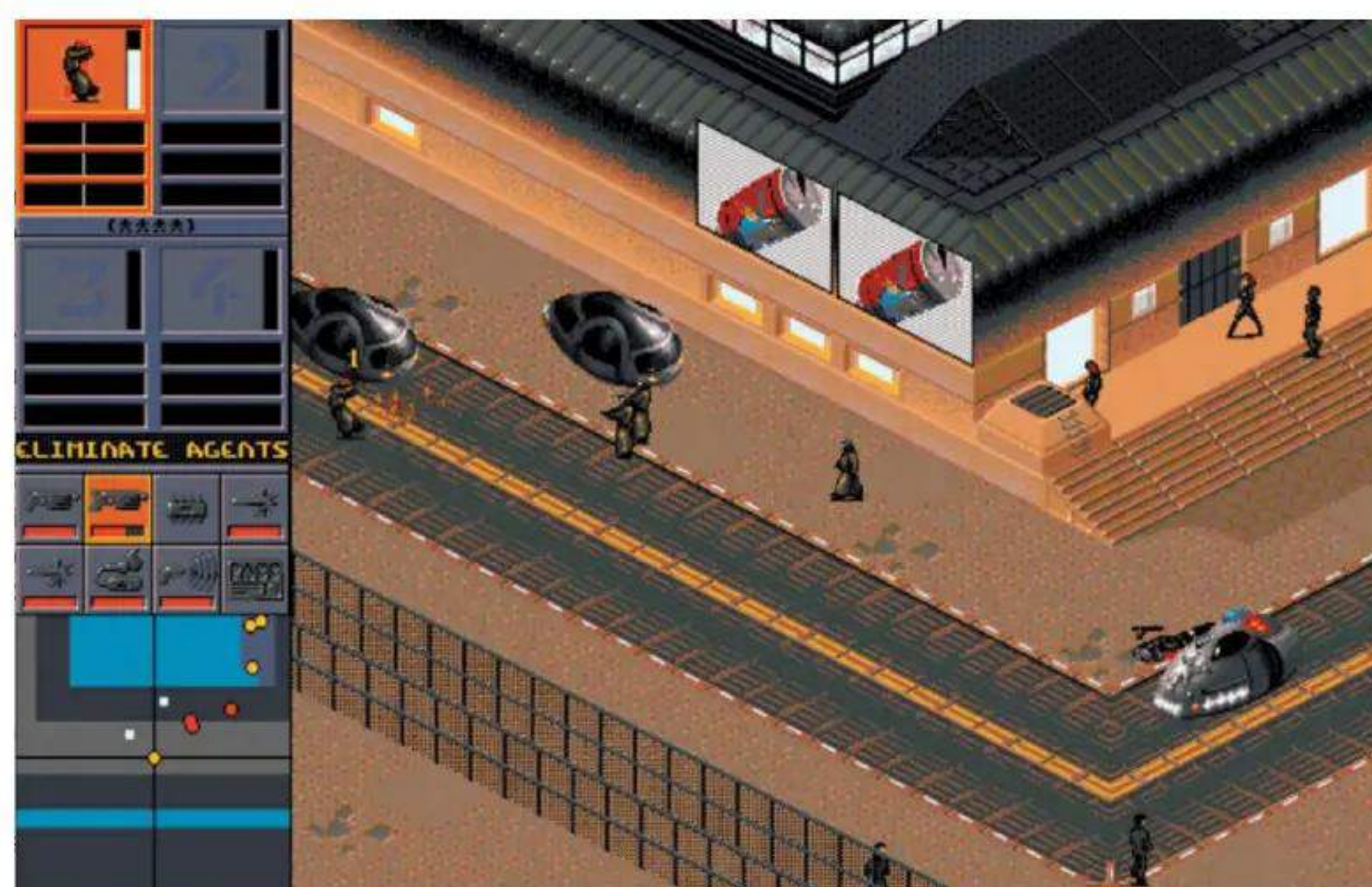
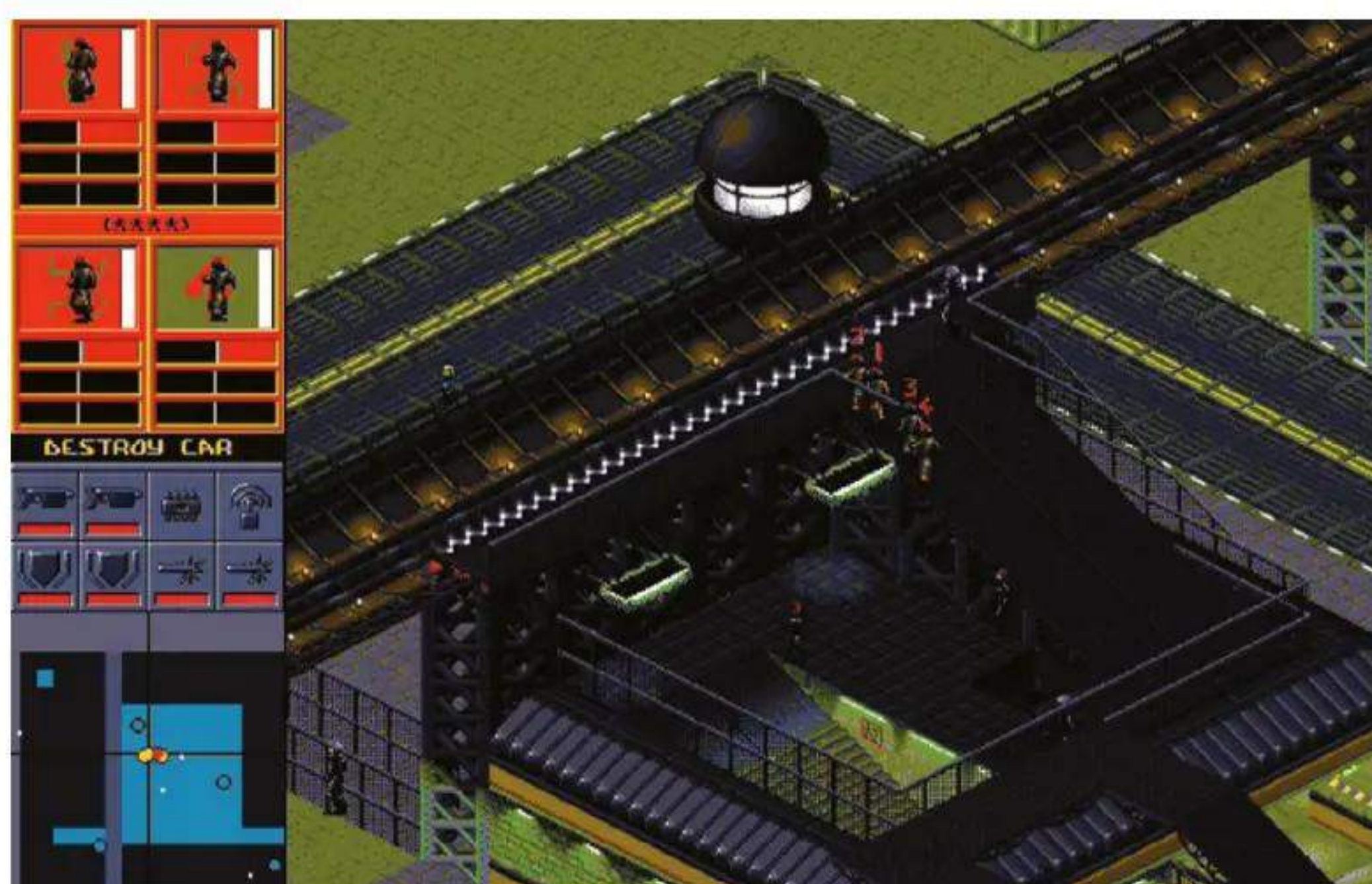


Succeed in a mission, and the city celebrates.



ABOVE: Weirdly, all your agents seem to have ginger hair.

LEFT: Blade Runner-esque animated adverts fill the cities, but it's not dark enough for them to really shine



» short-range automatic fire can seriously inconvenience your agents. You'll have the Uzi yourself by this point, there's one on the very first mission you can pick up, but there's a better choice for quick agent kills. The shotgun, a starting weapon, is ferociously powerful but has an even shorter range, meaning you have to play cat and mouse around the buildings to get them with a blast.

PERSUADE THIS

But there is another tactic. You'll need to buy a Persuadertron early in the game, and taking it to the Urals or nearby Siberia is a quick way to increase your stock of cyborgs. The Persuadertron works by shooting civilians, guards, police and even enemy agents full of drugs that turn them to your side, and is used to kidnap staff from rival corporations. It's also a hilarious way to cheese through a mission with a private army, as persuaded civvies will pick up dropped guns and go to war on your behalf. At first, you can persuade normal people easily, but to capture an enemy agent requires you to have drugged 32 pedestrians first. Upgrade your agents' brains, and this requirement drops.

So entering the Urals with a V3 brain upgrade and a Persuadertron means you need only persuade a few civilians, then you can start working your magic on the enemy agents and fill your ranks with another corporation's expensive operatives.

ANATOMY OF AN AGENT

The leg bone connected to the metal hip bone

1 EYES

New peepers mean night vision and targeting improvements.

2 CHEST

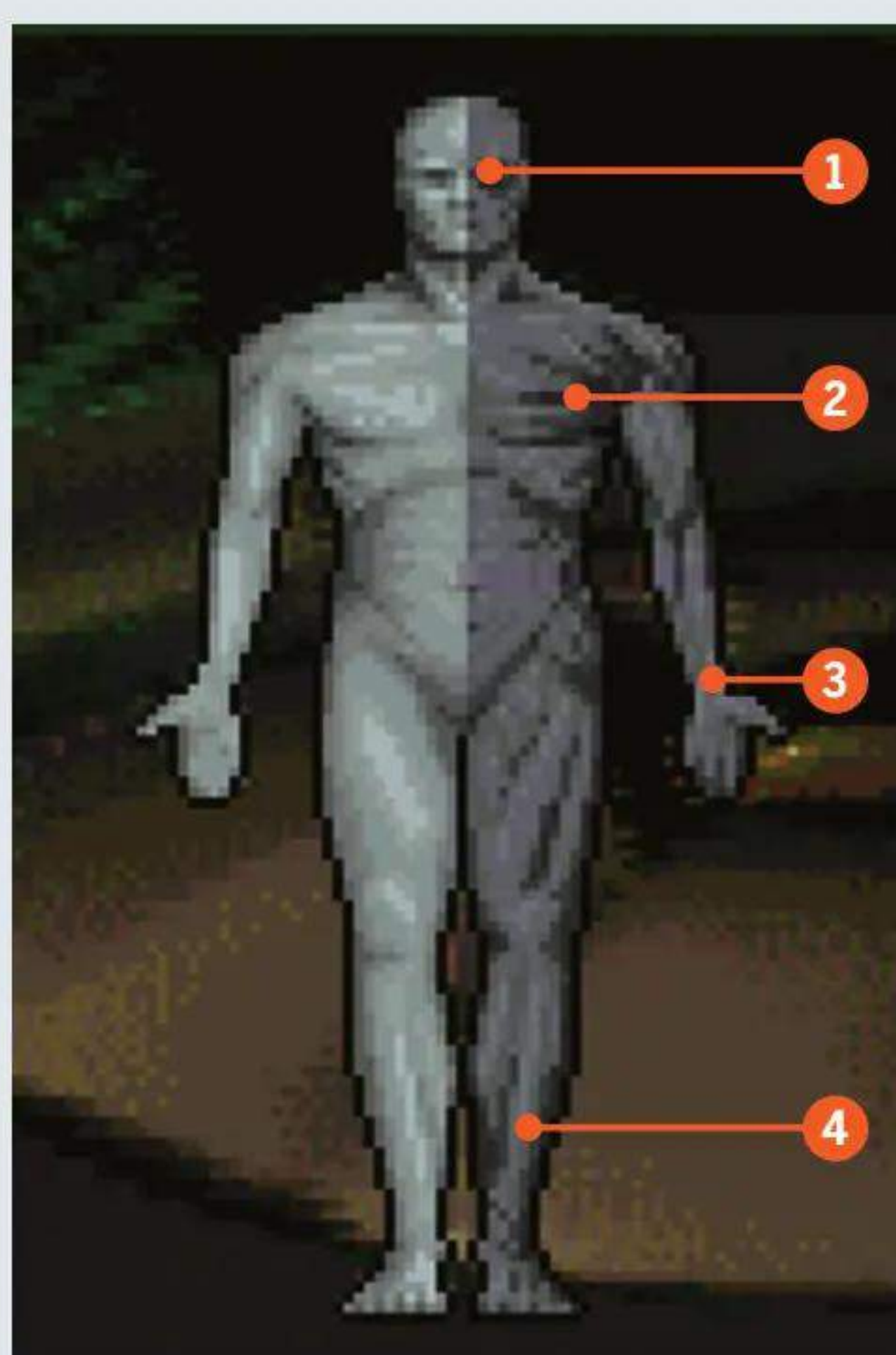
Upgrade this to gain regenerating health and better all-round toughness.

3 METAL ARMS

Increased carrying capacity for weapons is the reward for cutting your agents' fleshy arms off.

4 LEGS

A pair of new pins makes you walk faster.

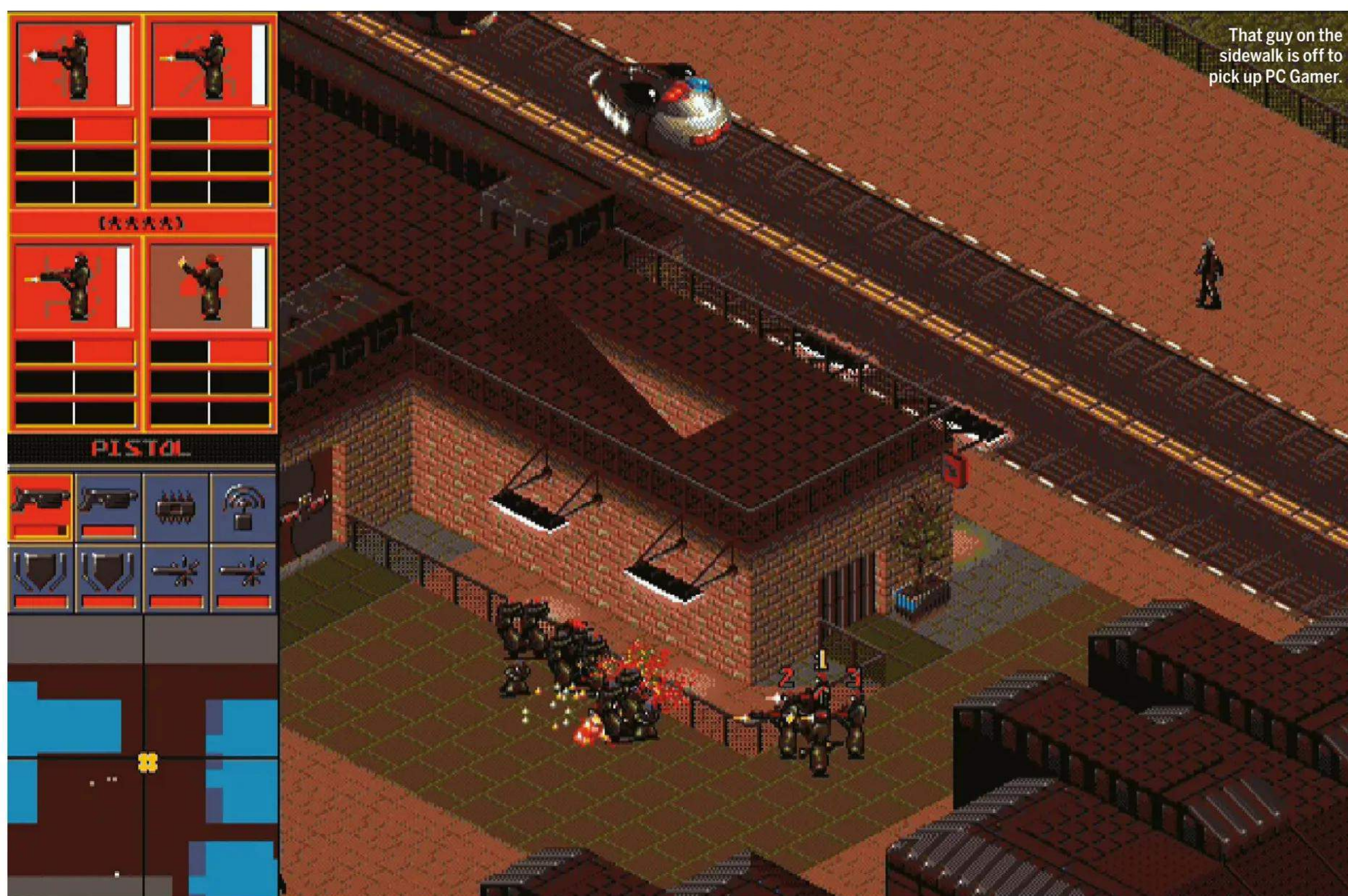


And you can always push the region into revolt by raising its taxes so you can play the mission again if you fancy some more.

SQUAD TACTICS

If you read the level briefings, it sounds like you're expected to split your squads up, keeping some agents outside the city for backup should things go awry, or even carrying out missions with a single agent. This would be vastly improved if it were possible to select two or three agents at once, but you're limited to either just one or all four. Those you're not controlling can be given a degree of autonomy using combat drugs, or even put into panic mode – press both mouse buttons at once – if you want them to blaze away at anything that moves. In practice, however, the group button that selects all agents at once suits the game better. Moving your team as a single super-agent, making sure their loadouts are the same so you can pull four of the same weapon for quad damage, is the way I've always played the game, with adrenaline levels set high to increase movement speed.

The other two combat drugs, intelligence and perception, allow you to leave an agent on its own to



defend itself. Putting an agent with V3 upgrades and a full weapon load in panic mode leads to it reacting with speed and accuracy to threats you may not even have seen. The world is viewed from a fixed isometric perspective, just as your controlling business development manager would see from their Zeppelin-based control platform. You can scroll around using the arrow keys, but your view isn't rotatable, which means it's possible for assassination targets and enemy agents to hide behind buildings even though you can see them clearly on the mini-map, leaving you scrubbing the cursor back and forth trying to get it to turn red for a firing solution.

An autonomous agent solves this problem, and you can leave a group of three in a convenient position before using the fourth under your control to pull enemies into a killing zone, though make sure they don't switch to gauss guns – the game's rocket launchers – as they're trigger happy and will burn through a lot of valuable ammunition. The minigun is the classic mid-to-late-game weapon, once you've upgraded your agents' arms to deal with the weight, as it packs a lot of ammo, has a decent

YOU CAN ALWAYS PUSH THE REGION INTO REVOLT BY RAISING ITS TAXES

range, and offers enough power to take out an agent in a few shots.

OPEN FIRE

The game's greatest weapon is the flamer, however. Its incredibly short range is a drawback, but being able to set an enemy on fire before seeing them run screaming across the level as a post-human torch before crumbling into ashes, the weapons they would have dropped immolated with them, is mind-blowing when you're 14 and still raises a smirk 30 years later. It can also fire through doors and fences, and nothing clears a car out quicker, turning it into a burning timebomb that prompts a tactical retreat before it explodes.

Syndicate Plus, which contains the *American Revolt* expansion that brought NetBIOS multiplayer to the game, fixes the level select bug from the original which allowed you to play a mission that wasn't available to you yet simply by selecting it and pressing Enter. *American Revolt* also

adds a couple of new weapons, including the devastating air strike, and brings 21 extremely tricky missions, even more so than the notorious Atlantic Accelerator combat sweep from the original, which saw the remaining enemy corporations team up against you.

Sadly, the DOSBox GOG version doesn't seem to particularly like running on modern hardware. The resolution or draw mode changes between the menus and the game itself proving too much in fullscreen, the game preferring to run in a very small window (some scaling options are available from the Graphic Mode Setup app, but can give the game a smeary look) that locks the mouse pointer, meaning you have to press the Windows key first if you want to move out of it. You have to be careful when pausing, as pressing Esc results not in a menu but in you immediately quitting (and failing) the active mission. It could do with some quality-of-life updates, if not a complete remaster, but does at least have the grace to quit without asking if you're sure. I'm a mid-level executive in a future cyber-corporation with teams of heavily armed agents under my control. Of course I'm sure. ■



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL



PROJECT WINGMAN'S 11TH MISSION, COLD WAR

A do or die, winner takes all dogfight over the Bering Strait. *By Noah Smith*

CONTRACT DETAILS

CIF-40
SICARIO GROUP
ASSIGNED TERM: SICARIO MERCENARY CORPS
CLIENT: CASCADIAN INDEPENDENCE FORCE

COLD WAR

TASK:
- ANNIHILATE FEDERATION PRESENCE IN THE REGION
- SOLIDIFY AIR SUPERIORITY IN NORTHERN CASCADIA



LEFT: Cold War's international scale gives it a truly larger-than-life atmosphere.



Project Wingman's 11th mission, Cold War, has a million-dollar premise. A rapidly escalating military crisis over the Bering Strait has snowballed into the largest air battle in history, pulling fighter squadrons the world over into a furball orders of magnitude beyond what any military expected. You're at the centre of a history-defining air battle, a front-row bucket seat for the moment that the revolt you've sold your skills to transforms into a world war, and I love every part of it.

The mission briefing starts with sirens and klaxons shrieking in the background, your commanding officer warning you that the second this presentation is over, he better see you run to your plane, because this is it. The sky is so dense with competing planes that tilting your plane's nose in any direction will elicit a chirping lock tone. *Project Wingman's* weighty, deliberate flight model feels best here; the constant back and forth between high speed pursuits and desperate, please-don't-stall-out-the-engine high-G turns are exhilarating. It's made better by a sound effect palette that conveys how hard you're pushing this machine, your airframe groaning painfully as you lean into a turn that'd tear lesser jets apart, your purring engine steadily building up to a ferocious roar as you hammer the throttle open. I always play in first person, where there's a touch of screen shake that sells the fantasy of being trapped inside a subsonic aluminium coffin completely.

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FIGHTER PILOT JARGON

Need to know top gun terminology



1 "BANDIT"
Callout for a plane confirmed as hostile.

2 "SPIKED"
Callout for an incoming infrared missile launch.

3 "VAPES"
Callout for condensation trails. Not disposable.

Project Wingman's gorgeous cloud and moisture rendering makes this fevered dogfight all the better: a blanket of turbulent thunderstorms and blizzards just above sea level bump and jostle your craft as you burn through, while the lighter cloud cover at higher altitudes provides brief moments of reprieve from an endless barrage of incoming missiles and fighters rapidly gaining on you.

The accompanying thumping

THEY'RE THE STRONGEST INDEPENDENT FIGHTER SQUADRON IN THE WORLD

bassline, orchestral strings, and, in a page ripped from *Ace Combat Zero*, a Spanish guitar, recontextualises combat as dance. I love how much this sound captures the romantic essence of the ace pilot fantasy, where the self-aggrandising mythologies of the old British and German flying aces formed the genesis of modern-day fighter pilot

subculture. The music is further complemented by this constant shrill beeping your plane makes as missiles swarm all angles. Still, in the hundreds of times I've replayed this mission, I've started to substitute the soundtrack with music of my own choosing – Death Grips' *Bottomless Pit*, Black Midi's *Sugar/Tzu*, and Thee Oh Sees' *The Dream* were my playlist, and it totally elevated the frantic experience.

BIG NAME HUNTING

The theming here is A+: The Federation, a globe-spanning ultra-liberal hegemony that's superseded the United Nations in the wake of global cataclysm, has fully committed to eliminating the majority of rival air power, even going as far to deploy the Peacekeepers in full at the mid-mission mark.

You get a brief taste of this elite squadron in an earlier mission. They're the strongest independent fighter squadron in the world, tasked with ending wars before they start, and now you have to face them down, at full strength, one versus eight. It's a great fight, with the Peacekeeper planes having some fancy vector thrust manoeuvres that let them suddenly change direction and escape your lock. Downing even one is a battle of endurance – your only chance is staying loose, bailing on tails you can't keep up with and merging onto others, waiting for just the right moment, and then punching the throttle, closing on the exhausted ace like a viper. It's intoxicating snuffing out these living legends one by one, and when you have five racked up on the scoreboard, the remnants go running.

Cold War is the mission where *Project Wingman* cements itself as one of the all-time greats in the niche genre of arcade air combat. Cold War's perilous 20 minutes have been an escape for me for years now, and I don't think that will ever change. ■



LEFT: Keep up with the Peacekeepers' acrobatics and punish them when they take time to breathe.



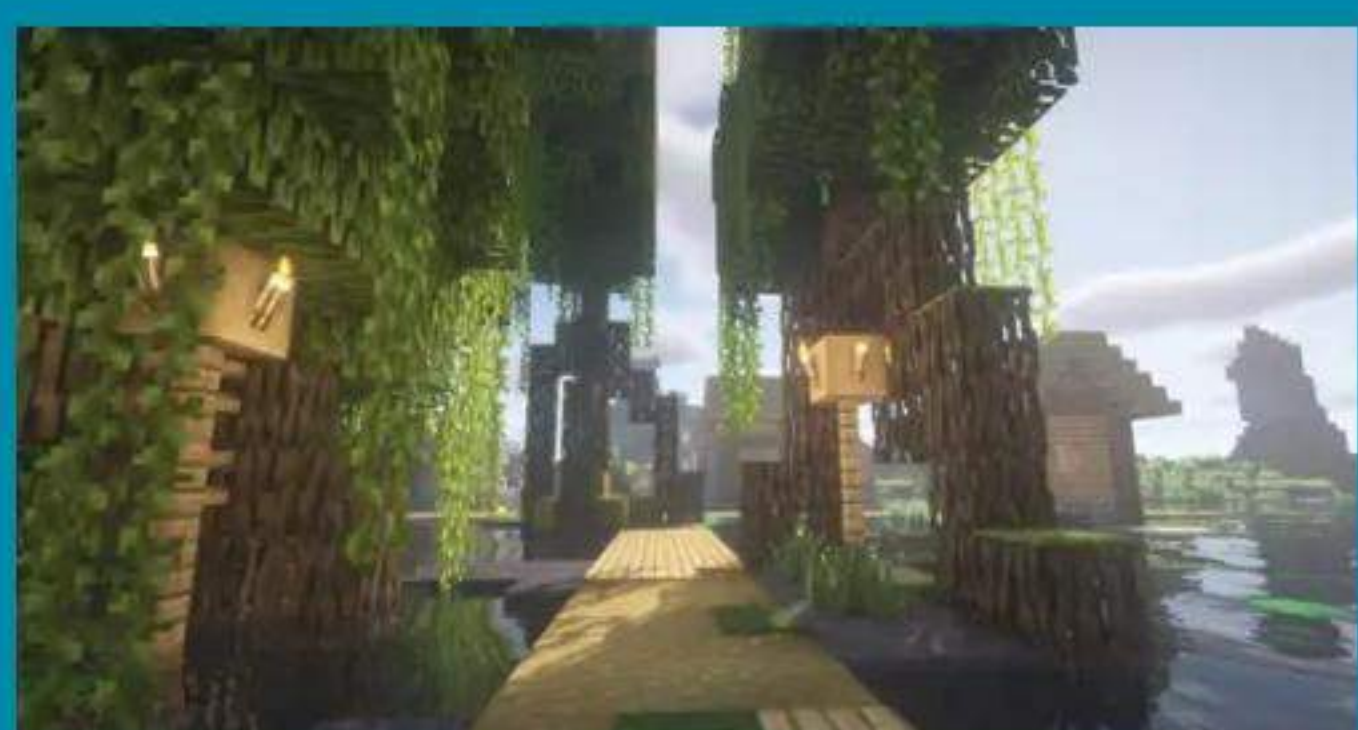


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

ZONKING OUT TO LONGPLAYS

The restful sounds of trees and guards soothe my soul. *By Mollie Taylor*



LEFT: The calming sounds of crashing waves and pirate plunder, perfect for nodding off to.



They say it's bad for you to have a television in your bedroom, and even worse to go to sleep while it's on, but just who is 'they'? Scientists? Pshaw. Silence is the enemy, and my brain must feast on soundwaves. I've been falling asleep with the TV on for as long as I can remember, and I've found the secret sauce to getting a good night's sleep with the perfect cosy background noise: longplays.

Now, I'm not talking about let's plays, the type where YouTuber273957109 is playing some guns-ablazin' spectacle, screaming down their battered toilet microphone. I'm talking about longplays – the 20-hour-long YouTube videos that come with zero commentary. Not only are they great for preservation, but they can be really neat ambient playthroughs.

Leisurely strolling through fields. Letting every single line of dialogue play out. The slow pans of the camera, soaking up every inch of the landscape. I always thought people who watched other people play videogames for fun were a bit weird, but longplays have given me a deeper appreciation for those who make them and the game worlds they're capturing so meticulously.

There's an art to picking the perfect bedtime longplay. It needs to be a game you've played before, so you're not tempted to open one eye every time you hear a noise or voice you're unfamiliar with. It also needs to be something that can be played in a laid-back manner.

SWEETROLL DREAMS

I've particularly fallen in love with *Skyrim* and *Minecraft* longplays. They're the perfect candidate for nighttime entertainment. I've always found something so inherently cosy about *Skyrim*'s medieval fantasy

SWEET DREAMS

Some more melatonin-inducing videogames



STARDEW VALLEY

The honeyed tones of crop harvesting and footsteps on dirt sends me to sleep every time.



SEA OF THIEVES

Not one I usually choose, but another popular pick. I think the water would make me need to pee, though.



THE WITCHER 3

Geralt's voice. That's it. That's all you need to be sent off into dreamland. A grumpy old man's soothing words.

vibes, even before I had years of baked-in nostalgia to deepen those feelings. Maybe it's something about how warm so much of the game feels, from the candles strewn throughout my home to the books taking up my entire inventory, all so I can place them on a bookshelf and watch them pop into existence one by one before collapsing into a heap.

Skyrim's enchanting music is no doubt doing a ton of the heavy lifting for those ultra-cosy and sleepy vibes, and can usually do a pretty bang-up

MAYBE IT'S SOMETHING ABOUT HOW WARM SO MUCH OF THE GAME FEELS

job of helping me doze off by itself. But there's something about layering the sound of the Dragonborn's feet hitting the dirt, or a Whiterun guard snarkily asking if someone stole my sweetroll that makes it all the better.

Loopy Longplays over on YouTube has proven to be a particular favourite of mine when it comes to these ultra-atmospheric endeavours around videogame worlds. The channel's *Skyrim* playlist covers everything from a 21-hour-long main quest video to

playthroughs of each DLC, to them taking a stroll through every single city in the game across 11 hours.

COUNTING BLOCKY SHEEP

Minecraft's longplays are covered by a much broader spectrum of YouTubers. Typing '*Minecraft* longplay' into the search bar will conjure up all manner of relaxing, hours-long videos, usually accompanied by some kind of rainfall while the creator goes about building a cosy cottage or lakeside cabin. Like *Skyrim*, it's privy to the soundtrack buff which, even outside of giving me the wistful fuzzies, encapsulates the calmness that a playthrough can bring. Sans creepers, skeletons and all the other scary mobs, of course.

I also love lying there with my eyes closed, hearing the satisfying pops and twinkles of *Minecraft*'s various sound effects. A tree being punched or stone being smacked away at with a pickaxe are sounds that are ingrained into my brain from years of play, their familiarity soothing. Some may find it bizarre, but it's like being audibly wrapped in the fuzziest blanket you can imagine.

Games are meant to be played, sure, but the way they're made can also be used to send me off for some particularly sweet dreams. These longplays have proven to be the perfect cocktail of nostalgia, atmosphere and comfort all blended into one night-long virtual melatonin gummy. It feels like a testament to just how much lasting impact games can have on us, too, that they can create such feelings of ease and happiness.

While it's not a failsafe sleep method every night, my last few months have been almost entirely consumed by these longplays, and I can't imagine myself getting bored of them anytime soon. Whatever your comfort game, maybe try whacking on a longplay if you're having trouble nodding off. It might just work. ■



FAR RIGHT: *Skyrim*'s medieval fantasy vibe is so cosy that I can't help but get sleepy watching longplays of it. Fus ro doze!





TRANQUILITY LANE

The best quest in Fallout 3 (not counting DLC). *By Jody Macgregor*



LEFT: Bring up your Pip-Boy and you'll see this novelty wristwatch.

RIGHT: Your first glimpse of what's to come.



People will tell you the best part of Bethesda RPGs is the sidequests, and sometimes that's true. But one of the most Wild Wasteland moments in *Fallout 3* is part of the main storyline, sitting right there on the critical path.

Your quest in *Fallout 3* is to find your dad, Liam Neeson. It's a better hook for an open-world game than the search for your son in *Fallout 4*, because everyone knows Liam Neeson can take care of himself. Bouncing across the Capital Wasteland, you're free to take your time safe in the knowledge you can return to Dad Quest later on.

You finally track the deadbeat down to Vault 112, where you expect some kind of dungeon crawl, maybe a fight with some mutants or vault dwellers. You find something else.

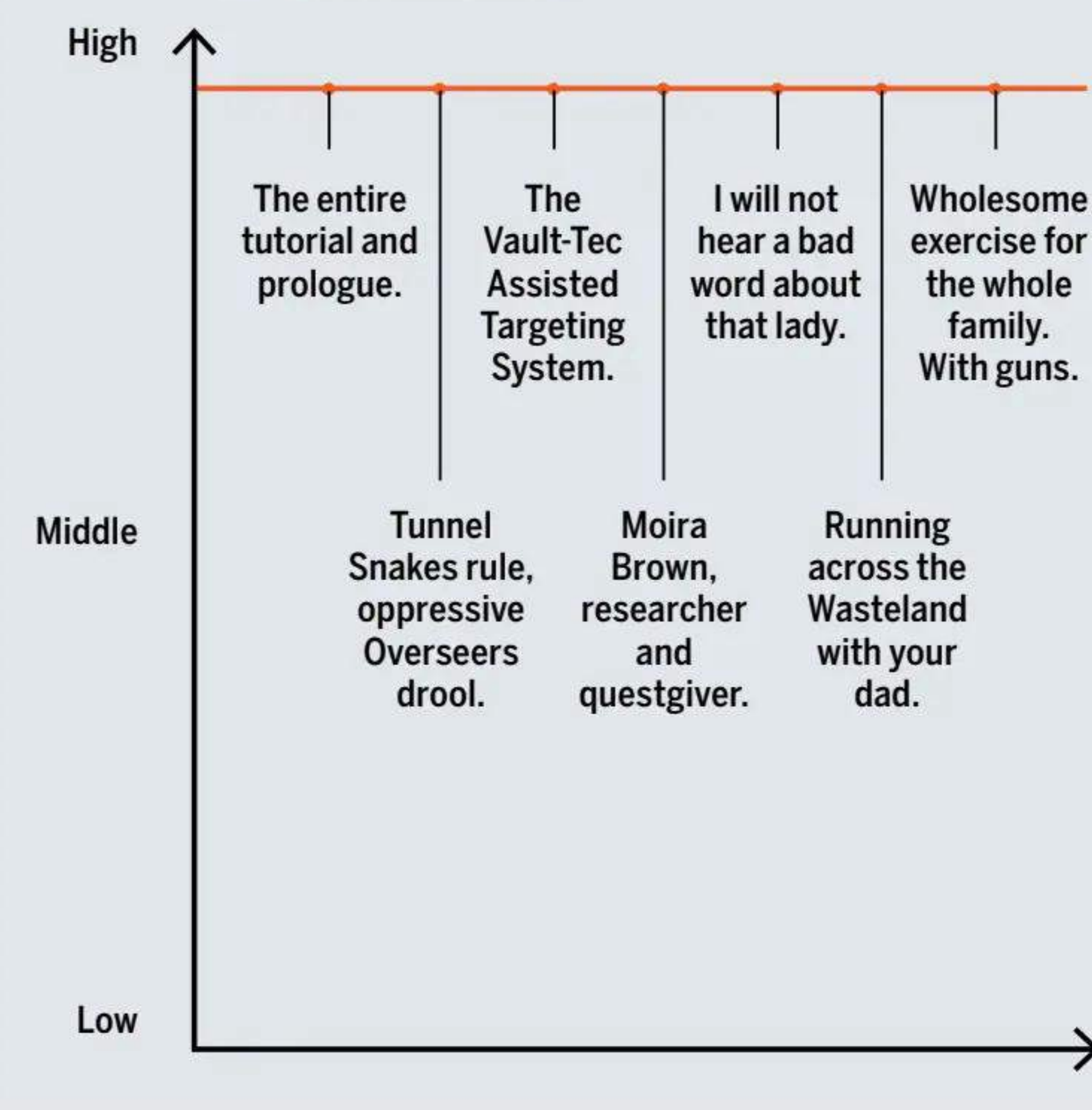
THUS DID TRANQUO

Vault 112's inhabitants have spent the last 200 years in a simulation, bodies suspended while their minds experience a series of pleasant virtual realities. Your dad went in to talk to the scientist who built it, Stanislaus Braun, and the only way to get him out is to follow. As the headset lowers over your face, the familiar loading screen message "PLEASE STAND BY" appears, to be replaced by the sedate black-and-white street called Tranquility Lane.

In this white-picket-fence American dream, *Fallout 3* becomes an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. While most of the residents are ignorant of their true nature, playing out their good neighbour roles in a

VATS ENTERTAINMENT

Other high points of *Fallout 3*



place where there was no war and there is no wasteland, one is different. A little girl named Betty, watering flowers with her dog in the middle of the street, is aware of the real world. Her voice slips, becoming that of the elderly scientist Braun, and things get extremely Village of the Damned.

BRAUN'S IN CHARGE OF THE SIMULATION, A VIRTUAL GOD, AND IT'S GONE TO HIS HEAD

Braun's in charge of the simulation, a virtual god, and it's gone to his head. He's been tormenting the inhabitants for kicks then resetting reality, over and over, and will only hand over your dear old dad if you take part in his twisted game. You're a child too in the simulation, which makes it even more messed up when Braun's game escalates. The first task

is making a boy cry; by the end you're committing atrocities.

STEPFORD LIVES

Fallout is at its best when it's offering multiple solutions to quests, letting you write your personality across its design. The first two games had three solutions for almost every problem, but *Fallout 3* often reduces that to good karma and bad karma. In Tranquility Lane, there are still good and bad karma options, but the bad karma ones branch like arteries.

When Braun tells you to murder Mabel, it's suddenly a *Hitman* level in miniature, her house overflowing with deathtraps. You can sabotage a chandelier to fall on her, or go full Looney Tunes with a roller skate at the top of the stairs. You can talk to the neighbours to learn she loves to bake pies, then rig her gas oven to explode. Or you can hack her house's security to lock the doors and turn her Mr Handy robot hostile, then evade the thing while it flamethrowers and saws her to death.

Fallout is a black comedy from the moment you see US soldiers gunning down Canadians in the street during the first game's intro, but that dark sense of humour was lost in the sequel. Tranquility Lane brings it back. I can't help but laugh when I'm the Pint-Sized Slasher. The jaunty music, the bright surroundings, the clown mask, all absurdly contrasted with the simulated citizens as they come apart at the joints just like the raiders you shoot for the other 50 hours you spend in *Fallout 3*.

"Wasn't it fun?" Braun asks afterwards. Sure it was. I was killing people in a videogame, that's what I signed up for. The good karma choice is to activate a failsafe that kills the residents in real life, ending their torment while leaving Braun alone in this hell of his own making. Which is the darkest option yet. There's no way out of Tranquility Lane without blood on your hands. ■

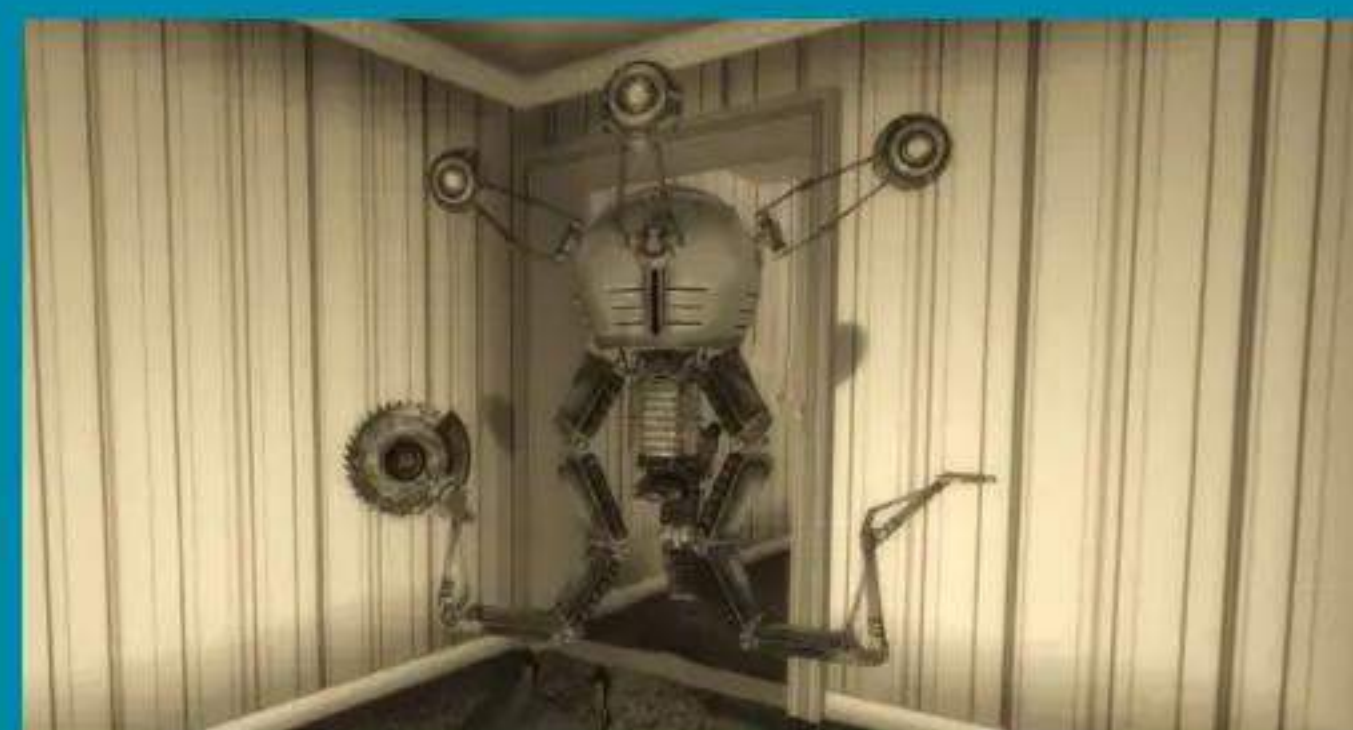
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RELEASE
Oct 28, 2008

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Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

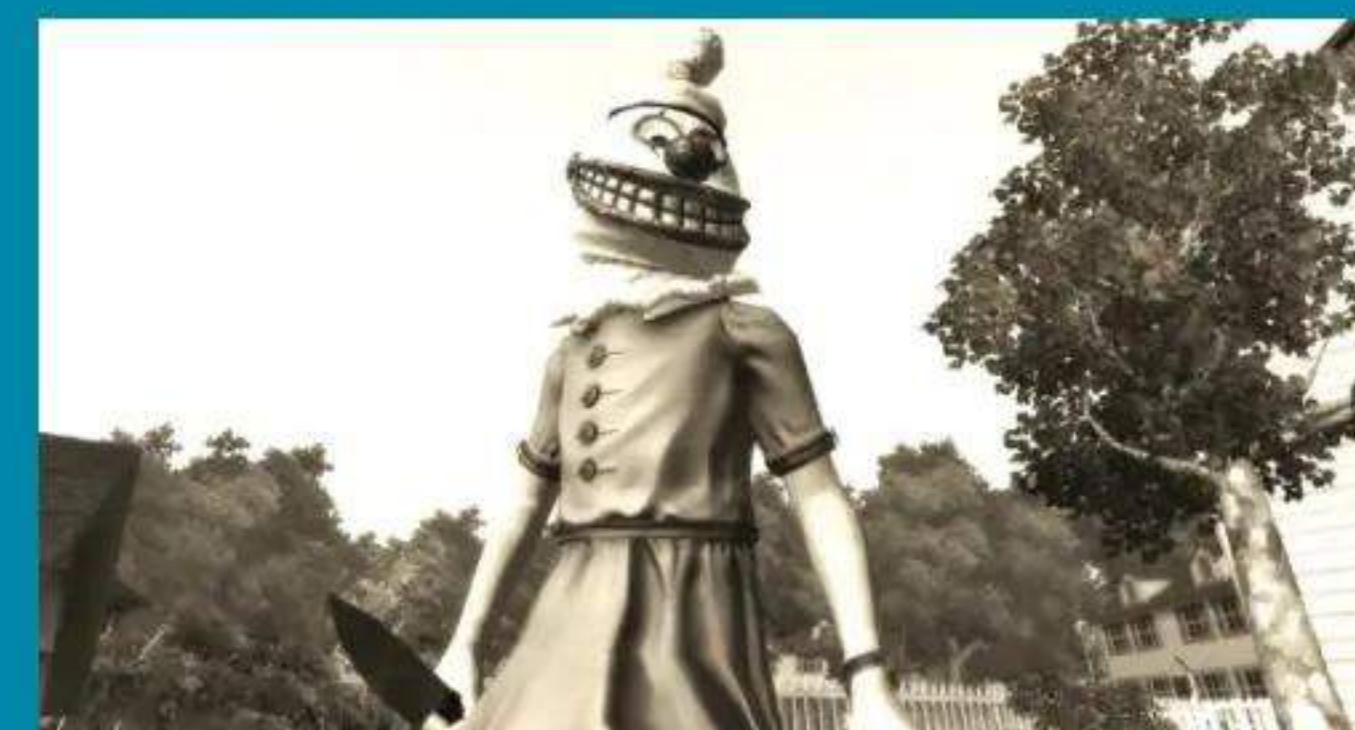
LINK
fallout.bethesda.net



LEFT: Mr Handy, what have you done?



RIGHT: This gnome has seen some shit.





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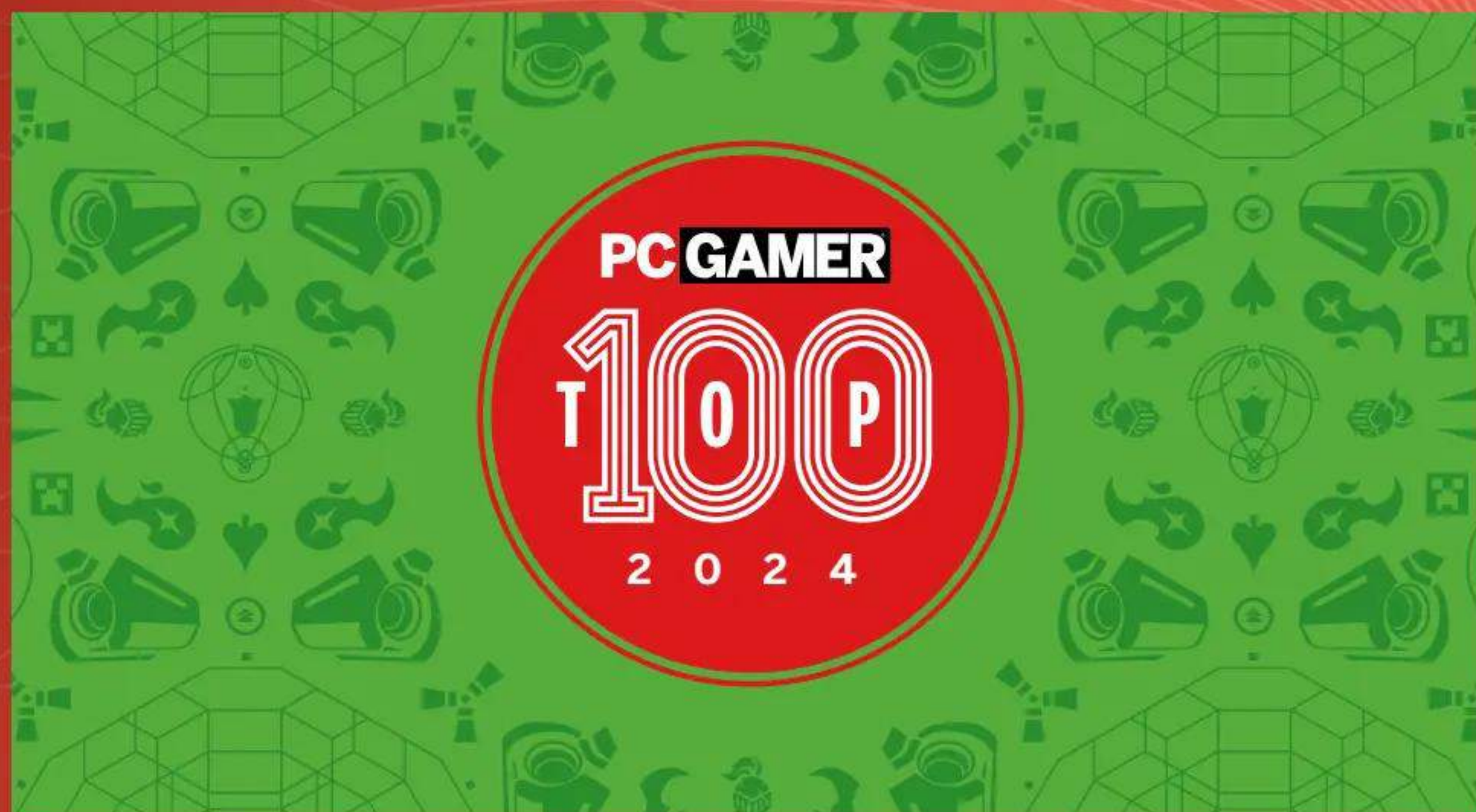
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